

The New Girl

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Summary: Rikki is sent to live with her Aunt Mags on the Florida Coast. She has to deal with the stress of being the awkward new girl in school, while trying to keep her secret from the handsome boy in her class. Can she do it? Can she trust her new friends? What happens when her secret gets out to a person she hardly knows? Mostly Rikki, set during season 3.

1. Home

Rikki leaned back in her chair, enjoying the late afternoon sun as it stung her skin gently. She couldn't imagine anywhere else in the entire world she'd rather be. Everything was perfect at this moment and she wouldn't change a thing. The waves crashed gently onto the shore as the sun beat down on her skin.

"Hey you." Zane leaned over from his seat beside her and took her hand in his gently. "Ready to head in?"

"Never." Rikki answered without opening her eyes. "Let's just stay here forever."

The pair sat together quietly as they listened to the shouts of their friends' beach volleyball game a few feet away. They were far enough from the water that they didn't need to worry about anything other than the sunburn they would face tomorrow. Cleo, Lewis, Will, and Bella were in the middle of a heated volleyball battle that was nearing its end. Lewis and Will were up by one point and were just about to win, much to Bella and Cleo's dismay.

"Cheater!" Cleo shouted across the net.

"Me? Never." Lewis shouted back innocently.

Bella shouted indignantly. "You liar, Lewis!"

"Hey, don't talk to my teammate that way." Will called back playfully.

The shouts all blended together as Rikki pulled her eyes open to gaze into Zane's. They weren't normally so mushy with one another, in fact, Rikki couldn't remember the last time they'd just looked at each other so simply. But it seemed to fit at the moment.

Rikki let her eyes close once again, savoring this rare moment. Cleo and Lewis wandered in from the volleyball game, Lewis teasing Cleo flirtatiously.

"There's no shame in being a loser." He joked as he ruffled her hair. "You can't win all the time."

"Yeah, yeah." Cleo rolled her eyes as she made her way to Rikki's towel. "Lewis and Will won by one point." She said in a monotone voice. "Better call in the circus. New attraction in town."

"Jealousy is not a pretty color on you, Cleo." Lewis said in a mock-serious tone. "It makes you look old."

Cleo squealed as she chased Lewis across the sand, playfully swatting his arm before tackling him down in the sand.

Bella flopped down onto the towel beside Rikki with a sigh. She laid down, losing her eyes as she enjoyed the warmth of the sun. "Perfect, huh?" She murmured.

"Mm hmm." Rikki hummed lightly, not bothering to open her eyes.

Lewis wandered back to the rest of the group, carrying Cleo over his shoulder as she playfully punched at his back. He dropped her down gently onto the sand and sat down behind her, wrapping his arms around her tightly. "We should get you girls inside soon." He said absently. "The moon will be up before too much longer."

"Yeah, yeah." Bella waved her hand at Lewis dismissively. "We've got plenty of time."

"Still," Lewis pressed. "This full moon will be closer to Earth than any other in a year, we need to be extra careful just in case-"

"Stop." Cleo pushed one hand over Lewis's mouth, effectively silencing him.

Lewis deflated, giving up on his warnings.

"Ew!" Cleo shrieked, pulling her hand back. "Lewis licked me!"

Lewis rolled on the sand with laughter as Cleo wiped her hand on her towel.

Bella and Will laughed as they watched the pair playing with each other. Will checked his watch, groaning. "Lewis is right." He admitted. "We need to get you girls inside."

Zane sat up slightly from his lounge chair. "I need to stop by the cafe right quick." He muttered. "Check and see how the new manager is

working out."

"Right." Rikki nodded slightly. Ever since the Sophie incident from two years ago the job seemed to have been jinxed. No one they hired seemed to want to stick around longer than a few months. Zane and Rikki had high hopes for the newest addition, a 24 year old local from town.

"Ok." Lewis stood and shook out his and Cleo's towels, sending sand flying through the air. "Sorry." He said sheepishly as Bella and Will spit sand out of their mouths. "We'll head down to the boat shed and get everything ready." He turned to Rikki and Zane. "See you two in a bit?"

"You got it." Rikki couldn't quite seem to sound as happy as she was trying to. There was a sadness in her voice that seemed more and more pronounced as the sun began to set.

"Hey." Zane heard her tone. "No tears today, ok?" He knelt down on the sand next to her.

"I'm sorry." Rikki choked up slightly.

"You'll be back before you know it." Zane smiled warmly up at her, instantly making her feel both happier and more upset. She was realizing just how much she was going to miss him.

A week ago, Rikki's Dad had been offered an amazing job opportunity in central Australia. It was simple work, but it paid way more than he'd been expecting. The job was setting him up with a small apartment to live in, but he had decided that it would be better for Rikki to spend the last semester of her senior year of high school in America with her Aunt Mags. Rikki had fought him bitterly, but he had put his foot down. He refused to let Rikki live with her friends or with Zane. His job site was miles away from a decent school. Plus, he said, it would be a rare opportunity for Rikki to live in another country. This was Rikki's last full day in Australia for the next 6 months, and she was miserable about it. Still, she and Zane had promised to call daily, and her friends were going to keep her updated on everything that she missed out on.

The six friends made themselves comfortable in Lewis's huge, concrete lined basement, where the moonlight couldn't reach them. There was a somewhat somber feel to the air as they played games and told jokes until late into the night.

The next morning came way too fast for any of them to be happy about it. Rikki hugged everyone quickly before leaving with Zane to get to her house for any last minute packing she needed to do. Lewis, Will, Cleo, and Bella would be meeting her at the airport later for proper goodbyes.

* * *

><p>"Promise me you won't fall in love with some tramp while I'm in Florida." Rikki lectured.<p>

"I've already promised three times!" Zane grabbed Rikki's shoulders and held her close. "You're my girl." He whispered, kissing her gently on the forehead.

"You be careful, I mean it." Cleo said seriously. She hugged Rikki so tight she couldn't breathe. "Don't let anyone find out our secret."

"I promise." Rikki hugged her friend back, trying not to get too upset.

"And you have to take tons of pictures, ok?" Bella joined in on the group hug.

"Of course I will." Rikki choked out. This was the first time since the change that she and Cleo would be separated, and the first time since she met Bella that she wouldn't see her practically every day.

"Now boarding flight 212 to Florida, United States." Came the voice over the intercom.

"I guess this is it." Rikki quickly brushed a small tear off her cheek. She gave hugs to Lewis and Will before wrapping her arms around Zane one last time.

"I'll see you soon." Zane kissed her on the mouth, making her forget for just a second that she wasn't going to see him for half a year.

Then, the harsh reality crashed back down around her. With a last look at the best friends she'd ever had, Rikki followed the hall down to the gate for her plane.

* * *

><p>The flight was way too long. Rikki had always thought she'd love to fly in an airplane, but this was miserable. Her seat was too small and she couldn't get comfortable enough to sleep. Once they finally landed she walked stiffly down the ramp.

"Rikki! Hey, Rikki!" A thin blonde woman waved at her enthusiastically. "Over here!"

Summoning what she was sure was a fake-looking smile, Rikki took her time walking over to the woman who was now jumping up and down. "Hi, Aunt Mags."

"Oh, Rikki." Mags pulled her in for a bone-crushing squeeze. "I'm so glad you're here! Come this way, we'll get your bags and then I have _so much_ to tell you!"

Rikki felt like she was walking in a dream as she followed her constantly chattering Aunt out to the waiting car. She learned all kinds of things. She would be attending Blue Valley High School beginning tomorrow, Mags (who kept telling Rikki to call her Maggie) was allergic to dogs, and Mags had already set up a course schedule for Rikki, one she assured her that she would love.

Rikki kept waiting to wake up, preferably back home in Australia. She didn't want to start a new school, or meet new people. Her phone beeped loudly. It was a text from Zane.

'Make it to USA alright?'

'Yes.' She typed back. 'I miss you.'

'I love you.' Zane answered.

Feeling marginally better, Rikki forced herself to make stilted conversation with Aunt Mags. Before too long they pulled into the driveway in front of a huge white home.

"Listen, Rikki," Mags began as she cut off the engine. "I know this is a huge change for you, kiddo, and I know you miss your friends, but I know you're going to love it here." She smiled encouragingly.

"I'm sure." Rikki couldn't keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"Ok then." Mags seemed satisfied that her words of encouragement had done the trick. "I'm sure you're completely jet lagged. You'll probably want to get some sleep, you've got school in the morning!"

Rikki stood inside her temporary home, taking in her surroundings. Everything was white and brightly lit, making the place look bigger than it actually was.

"Your room is just through here." Mags gestured up the stairs.

Rikki's room was the first one on the right. It was a decent size, with a huge window that looked out towards the ocean, which was maybe half a mile away. For the first time, Rikki felt a wave of sleepiness wash over her. She fell onto the bed, not even bothering to take off her shoes.

"I'll just let you get some rest, then." Mags whispered as she switched off the lights.

Rikki was asleep in minutes, her dreams filled with memories of Australia, mermaids, and Zane.

2. The first day

"Rikki... wakey wakey..."

It took a herculean effort to pull open her eyelids. Rikki looked around at the unfamiliar room, which was spinning slightly as she tried to wake up.

"I'm too tired..." Rikki groaned. "I'll go to school tomorrow, k?"

"Nope!" Mags threw open the curtains, letting even more sunlight stream into the room. "Today is the first day of school since the break, you don't want to miss the first day." She plopped down onto the bed. "Trust me. It's the best time to make new friends, when everyone is starting fresh."

"Aunt Mags-" Rikki tried to sit up.

"Maggie!" She corrected.

"Maggie," Rikki managed to sit up straight. "It's too early, I need at least a day to recover from jet lag."

"We leave for school in thirty minutes, kid. Better hurry if you want to get a shower." Maggie patted her on the knee and walked out of the bedroom, pulling the door firmly closed behind her.

Feeling as if she were moving through molasses, Rikki stumbled to her suitcase and pulled out the first pair of shorts and top that she touched. She ran a comb through her untamed mess of blonde hair and slid on a pair of flip flops.

"There you are!" Mags looked up from the frying pan as Rikki walked down the stairs. "I've made breakfast, have a seat."

"I'm not hungry." Rikki was still trying to be a fully functioning human being. All she really wanted to do was crawl back into the bed.

"Ah, but you will be." Mags slid a plate loaded with bacon and eggs in front of her. "And don't worry, I packed you a nice big lunch." She gestured to a brown paper bag with the name 'Rikki' printed on it in big bold letters. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Rikki. "Is that what you're wearing on your first day? Did you even wash your face?"

"Please don't make me go to school today." Rikki pleaded, looking up at her Aunt with what she hoped was a pathetic expression. She also hoped she'd done an effective job of changing the subject. Her father never seemed to notice that Rikki didn't shower or wash up. She couldn't.

"Sorry toots, you're going." Mags fixed herself a plate and joined Rikki at the table. "Milk?"

It seemed like only a few minutes later that Mags was pulling into the somewhat intimidating gates of the high school.

"Do you want me to walk in with you?" She asked for the third time.

"I'm fine." Rikki said blankly as she hopped out of the car.

"Have a great day at school, sweetie!" Mags blew her a kiss before driving away.

Rikki stood on the front steps, looking up at the building in front of her. Students walked past her on either side, chattering and catching up with one another. Just inside the front door was a sign pointing towards the main office. Rikki navigated her way inside, pushing her way through a huge crowd of kids.

"Excuse me." She said to the woman at the main desk. "This is my first day. Rikki Chadwick."

"Ah..." The plump woman smiled cheerily up at her. "You're our new Australian student, I can tell. I just love your accent." She tapped

at the computer keys. "Yes, here we are." She printed out a sheet of paper and handed it to Rikki, along with a map of the school. "If you have any questions you just come on by and see me, k?"

It humiliated Rikki to hold the map in front of her as she walked, but she managed to navigate her way to her first class, English, without too much trouble. She took a seat near the front of the class as the teacher bustled in.

"Ms... Gibbs..." The teacher said aloud as she printed it on the chalkboard. She then turned to look at the rest of the class. "Look at all the familiar faces." She said with a wide smile as her eyes landed on Rikki.

"Please don't point me out. Please don't point me out. Please don't point me out." Rikki begged in a whisper.

"And we have a new student with us today." Ms. Gibbs announced brightly. "Come on up, Rikki, and tell us a bit about yourself."

"Damn it." Rikki muttered as she walked to the front of the room reluctantly. Her classmates snickered slightly as they observed her mismatched outfit and unruly hair.

"Um, hey guys." Rikki waved awkwardly before shoving her hands in her pockets. "Yeah, my name is Rikki. I actually just arrived in the country yesterday-"

"Whoa." A skinny blonde girl wearing too much makeup interrupted her. "Are you, like, from England?"

"Australia." Rikki corrected her. "And now I'm here, so... that's about it." She started to make her way back to her desk.

"Say something!" A boy shouted from the back of the room.

"Yeah, say something really Australian." A girl chimed in. "Hey, say 'Shrimps on the Barbie!'"

"Now class, I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities to hear Miss Chadwick's accent." Ms. Gibbs hushed them.

The rest of the day went on just the way the first class had. Every teacher had Rikki come up to the front of the room to introduce herself to the class. Lunch was uneventful. Rikki was invited to join a table full of popular students, but once she sat down they spent the whole lunch period asking her to say things in 'Australian,' and then giggled after she did so.

"Finally." Rikki sighed as she dropped into a desk in her last class of the day, a class simply called 'Life Skills.'

"Hello, class." A very young man walked into the room, carrying far too much to be graceful. He had a slightly unkempt air about him, with shaggy hair that always seemed to be in his eyes. "My name is Hadley Cruz." He spoke while he arranged his desk. "Most of you know me already. Those of you who don't, well, you will soon enough. So, Life Skills class..."

Rikki could hardly believe it. For the first time all day she wasn't singled out as the new girl. She instantly liked this teacher and his laid back teaching style. There were only a handful of students in this class, which seemed like a pretty silly course. Mr. Cruz explained that they would cover a variety of topics, including how to change a car tire and how to darn a sock.

The bell finally rang, signalling the end of what to have been the longest school day ever. Rikki packed up quickly and went outside to wait for her Aunt to pick her up.

"Hey." A vaguely familiar looking boy caught her by the elbow. "I'm Al, we have English and Math class together."

"Right." Rikki said, remembering him from classes.

"Hey, you know, if you need any help finding your way around the school I'd be glad to help you out." Al flushed slightly as he spoke, creating a stark contrast with his white-blond hair.

Rikki blushed slightly as well, embarrassed at his attention. "Thanks." She said, suddenly distracted by a crack of thunder in the quickly darkening sky.

"Do you need a ride home?" Al asked hopefully. "My mom lets me borrow her Camry, I'm parked just over there."

"Is it going to rain?" Rikki began to panick slightly. "The weather report said it would be clear all day." She looked up and down the line of cars but saw no sign of her Aunt Mags. Another crack of thunder made Rikki jump.

"Oh, it rains here almost every single afternoon." Al was saying. "But it'll just be a quick shower and then it'll be sunny again. You'll get used to it."

"You know, a ride would really be great." Rikki said quickly. "Which way is your car?"

"Really? Great!" Al's face lit up, as if he hadn't been expecting her to accept his offer. "This way." He started around the corner towards the student lot.

"Let's run." Rikki grabbed his arm and began to jog as the sky became even more threatening.

Al seemed all too happy to oblige her, jogging right along side her. "It's that blue one, there." He pointed.

Rikki dashed to the car and yanked open the passenger door. She jumped inside as fast as she could manage, pulling the door shut behind her. For just a moment she felt silly for running like a child. The sky was dark, sure, but it wasn't raining yet.

No sooner had she had that thought than the sky did open up. Rain poured down, drenching everything in seconds.

"You must really hate getting wet, huh?" Al chuckled as he started the engine.

"Um, these are new clothes." Rikki said lamely, gesturing to her old, slightly discolored top. "Dry clean only."

Maybe Al just chalked Rikki's weirdness up to the fact that she was from Australia, but he didn't say a word. Rikki sent a quick text to Mags to let her know that she had a ride home, then gave Al her address. Thankfully, he had a GPS in his phone.

By the time Rikki got home the rain had already stopped falling and the sun was shining bright.

"See?" Al grinned. "It never rains long. Well, until hurricane season."

"Thanks for the ride." Rikki said hastily as she reached for the door handle.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Al called after her.

"So how was your first day?" Mags called from the kitchen.

"Swell." Rikki didn't even try to sound like she'd enjoyed it.

"I'll bet you're ready to hit the hay, huh?" Mags checked her recipe before adding nutmeg to whatever she was mixing on the stove.

"Actually..." Rikki slowly walked to stand next to her Aunt. "How do I get to the ocean?"

"Oh, you want to go swimming? Great!" Mags lit up like a Christmas tree light. "I was actually thinking about heading down later on today-"

"I'd like to go now, if that's alright." Rikki cut her off before she could get too excited.

"And that's fine too." Mags returned to her mixing.

Rikki jotted down the directions Mags (Maggie) gave her, then hurried out the door.

The sand on the beach appeared to have already been bleached dry by the hot sun above, there wasn't even a sign that it had rained not an hour ago.

Rikki walked along the shore, being careful to stay far away from the tide. She didn't know how far she waked, but eventually the number of people on the beach dwindled. After another twenty minutes of wading she appeared to be the only person for as far as she could see. A wooden dock stood alone, reaching out into the waves. It was two tiered, with one level slightly higher than the other.

Rikki walked out onto it, enjoying the salty breeze on her face. She turned a slow circle, looking to see if anyone was nearby. Not a soul was in sight. Without hesitation, Rikki dove off the dock and into the waves.

It felt amazing just to change, to swim freely out into the sea. Rikki could feel the stress of the day disappearing as she powered

herself through the water. She didn't know how long she was out there, but when the sun eventually began to set she decided it would be a good idea to head back in. She swam back the way she came, savoring the last few minutes in the water. She surfaced sightly, looking for the dock she'd jumped off of.

Rikki froze in the water, not daring to move a muscle.

A white boat was tied to the dock. Rikki didn't know how long it had been there, or if it's owner was anywhere nearby. Rikki anxiously looked up the beach, searching for another way out of the water. There wasn't another dock in sight, and she didn't dare pull herself out onto the sand. It took too long and there was too much of a chance that she would be seen.

Rikki weighed her options, but couldn't see any other way out of the water. She would just have to be super quick. Rikki watched the dock for a few more minutes, but didn't see any sign of the boat's owner.

Swimming at full speed, Rikki flew towards the dock. She pulled herself out of the water and dropped onto the lower level of the wooden floor. As fast as she could, and feeling completely and utterly exposed, she dried herself off, sending waves of steam up into the air.

"You're an idiot, Rikki." She scolded herself. "This was just stupid."

She jumped to her feet, straightening her clothes as she did so.

"Excuse me." A deep voice came from just a few feet away.

Rikki choked out a short scream as she jerked in surprise. Had he seen her? Rikki cursed under her breath as she tried to regain control of her breathing.

"This dock is personal property, you know." A young man Rikki's age stepped forward from the top of the dock. He had dark features, with the darkest pair of brown eyes Rikki had ever seen. They seemed to hold her in place.

"I'm sorry." Rikki stammered. "I didn't know it was yours."

"You knew it didn't belong to you." The dark boy took a few steps forward, not giving anything away with his face.

Rikki swallowed hard. If he had seen her climb out of the water he certainly wasn't acting like it. He just seemed ill that she was on his property.

Rikki had to walk closer to him in order to get back to the sand. She gingerly stepped up onto the upper level of the dock and walked slowly over it. "It won't happen again." She muttered as she crept past him.

"Wait." He commanded before she could get away.

Rikki froze with her back to him, terrified of what he was about to

say. "Yes?" She turned, trying to keep her face nonchalant.

"What were you doing out there?" He walked to stand uncomfortably close to her, staring at her hard. "If you tampered with my boat I'll--"

"What? No, I didn't touch your boat, I swear." Rikki said quickly. "I was just... looking at the water." She finished lamely. She had begun to relax the slightest bit. It didn't appear that this stranger had seen anything other than her standing up. "Sorry again." She said before jogging up the beach back towards home, her heart pounding the entire way.

3. Water

Rikki's second day of classes passed by just as slowly as the first one had. Rikki was still a novelty item in class, though she was more than ready to be ignored. Sure, everyone was nice to her, but it was almost like they were too nice. Fake nice. Rikki desperately missed her friends back home, but she tried to keep a smile on her face as she walked from class to class.

The only part of the day that Rikki looked forward to was Mr. Cruz's Life Skills class. He seemed to be comfortable teaching, and nothing seemed to stress him out. It was easy to like him and his style. And, unlike any of Rikki's other teachers, he never singled her out. In an odd way, he reminded her of Lewis.

"Sorry I didn't get this out to you guys yesterday," Mr. Cruz said as he passed out copies of the course syllabus. "Go ahead and look it over, this is a full breakdown of what we'll be working on this year."

Rikki's eyes flickered down over the list. They'd already discussed the course breakdown, so she was familiar with most of the items. Then her eyes landed on an item they had most definitely not gone over. Her arm immediately shot into the air.

"Yes? Rikki?" Mr. Cruz walked to stand beside her desk, pushing his hands into his pockets as he moved.

"We're swimming?" Rikki's voice squeaked a bit as she pointed to the item on the syllabus.

"Ah, yes." Mr. Cruz smiled at her warmly before turning to address the whole class. "I thought you all might enjoy a break from the classroom. Next month we'll be spending two days a week becoming skilled swimmers down at the college pool. You can thank me later."

Kids all around were high-fiving each other and celebrating. Rikki, however, felt like she might already be sinking.

The bell rang, signalling the end of the day. Rikki gathered her things and waited by Mr. Cruz's desk, formulating just what she was going to say.

"You should be running! School is out! Get out of here!" Mr. Cruz joked as he walked behind his desk. "What can I do for you Rik?" He

brushed his too-long brown hair out of his eyes as he sat down.

"The swimming..." Rikki began hesitantly. "It is absolutely mandatory?"

Mr. Cruz's brow furrowed slightly. "I would have pegged you for an excellent swimmer, Rikki." He tilted his head slightly to one side as he looked up at her. "But I'm sure we can find something else for you to do if you really don't want to swim."

Waves of relief washed over Rikki, her face breaking into a huge smile. "Thank you so much, really."

"Hey, don't mention it. I'm not here to make your life miserable." Mr. Cruz patted her on the shoulder as someone walked through the classroom door.

"You're mister Cruz, right?" A young man rudely pushed past Rikki and handed the teacher a white slip of paper. As he did, he turned to give Rikki a hard look.

Rikki froze, unable to move even a single muscle. It was the same boy from the dock yesterday, the one who had come dangerously close to catching her.

"Welcome to class... Nick." Mr. Cruz read the name from the slip before making a note in his attendance book. He then turned back to Rikki. "Congratulations, Rik, you are no longer our newest student."

"Nick Donovan."

It took Rikki a moment to realize that the boy was holding a hand out to her, clearly waiting for her to shake it.

"Rikki Chadwick." It took effort, but she managed to take his hand in hers.

Recognition immediately swept across Nick's face. He clearly remembered her from yesterday. He dropped her hand quickly, turning to look at Mr. Cruz. "Are you going to give me any course info or what?" He asked brusquely.

"Here you are." Mr. Cruz pushed a copy of the syllabus across the desk to him.

Nick didn't say another word to either of them, he just crumpled the syllabus into his pocket and marched out the classroom door, slamming it shut behind him.

"Well he must be a blast at parties." Mr. Cruz said sarcastically as he packed his bag.

"Yeah." Rikki couldn't believe her bad luck. At least Nick hadn't seen anything yesterday. She pulled herself together, shaking herself out of her head. "Thanks again, I'll see you tomorrow."

Rikki hurried down the hall as her phone beeped in her pocket. It was a text from Mags.

'Stuck at work, can u find a ride home?'

Rikki groaned. Today there was no sign of Al to drive her. To make matters worse, she could already hear thunder booming from not too far away. Rikki leaned forward, resting her forehead on the cool locker in front of her, trying to figure out what to do. By now the halls were empty, and she didn't know who she could ride with before the rain began to fall.

"What is it with you and other people's property?" A familiar voice came from behind her.

Rikki whipped around, coming face to face with an extremely pissed off Nick.

"That's my locker." He raised his eyebrows coolly, waiting for her to move off of it.

Wordlessly, Rikki pushed past him and took off towards the back entrance of the school. More than anything, she wanted to be as far from Nick as possible. There was something about him that gave her the heeby-jeebees.

Rikki had never used the back entrance before. By the time she reached the double door, rain was already pouring down outside.

"Damn." Rikki leaned against the glass of the door. A covered pull-thru was right outside the door, probably for allowing parents to drop off kids without them getting wet. Carefully, Rikki stepped outside, staying well sheltered from the rain. She would just have to wait this out.

A slightly worn red Mazda pulled into the drive-thru, pausing under the awning. Mr. Cruz stepped out of the driver's side. "Do you need a ride home?" He called.

"That would really be great, actually." Rikki said gratefully as she walked towards the car.

Mr. Cruz jogged around to the passenger door and pulled it open. Rikki said a silent prayer of thanks for his chivalry, the car door handle had been dripping wet.

Her teacher picked up a stack of paper from the front seat and dumped it in the back. "Make yourself comfy." He gestured to the freshly cleared seat.

Rikki settled down into the warm car. It suited Mr. Cruz. It was comfortable and almost already familiar to her. Rikki examined her teacher as he slid into the driver's seat beside her. He couldn't be more than a few years older than she was. It was almost hard to believe he was a teacher.

"Where to?" He said with a smile.

Rikki gave him quick directions. "I really appreciate you driving me."

"Hey, I couldn't just leave you sitting outside, could I?"

The two made easy conversation with one another during the ride. Sure enough, just as Rikki had figured, Mr. Cruz had only graduated from college a few months ago. Rikki also learned that he had a chocolate labrador named Dave, he was allergic to red dye #5, and his mother had named him Hadley in honor of his grandfather. He like to talk, which was fine by Rikki. It took the pressure off of her.

"Here you are." He announced as they pulled into the driveway.

Rikki didn't know what to do next. It hadn't stopped raining yet. It wasn't coming down hard, but all it took was one drop of water to change her.

"Um... Thanks again..." She stalled as she weighed her options.

"Not a problem. You know, I actually live just a couple streets over." Mr. Cruz nodded up the road. "And don't stress, k? You'll get used to things here soon. Just give it a few days."

"Yeah..." Rikki said distractedly as she judged the distance from the car to the front door of the house. Mags wasn't home yet. She had about ten seconds after touching water before she would change, she could probably make it if she ran. She pulled her house key out of her purse, ready to run.

"I'll see you tomorrow." She said hastily as she threw open the car door and raced towards the house. Rikki slammed her key into the lock and burst through the door. She pushed it closed, panting hard. A second later she felt the change beginning. Rikki pitched forward onto the floor, her golden fin unfurling behind her.

Rikki let out a long exhale, incredibly thankful that she had made it inside in time. After a minute to catch her breath, she rolled onto her back and dried herself off. "Stupid Florida rain."

* * *

><p>The rest of the week passed by much like the first two days. The only class that Rikki really enjoyed was Mr. Cruz's. She felt really relaxed around him. He seemed more like a friend than a teacher to the students, and Rikki found herself becoming more and more comfortable within the small group.<p>

The one part of class that made Rikki uneasy had nothing to do with the course itself. Nick hadn't warmed up to her in the slightest. In fact, he usually seemed to be downright angry with her. Sometimes Rikki would catch him staring at her, his face brooding and serious. He hadn't spoken to her since the day they'd introduced themselves, and that was just fine with her.

Most of the student body seemed to have gotten used to having Rikki around by the end of the week. The boys were still super friendly, though the girls in her classes had become slightly more catty, shooting jealous looks at Rikki out of the corners of their eyes. Rikki didn't care what they thought, she just minded her own business.

The highlight of every day was when she got to speak to Zane. It was reassuring to hear his voice telling her that she'd be home soon and

he couldn't wait to see her. She was dying to see him, or any of the rest of her friends back home.

"I have a surprise for you." Mags's eyes were sparkling with excitement as Rikki made her way down the steps on the following Monday morning.

"No school today?" Rikki dropped sleepily into a chair at the table.

With a grin, Mags held a hand out towards Rikki. Resting in her palm was a set of car keys. "Work is giving me a company car, so I thought you might like to drive my car to school from now on."

Rikki brightened immediately. "Seriously? Mags, that's awesome. Thanks so much."

"Now you won't have to worry about my work schedule." Mags said proudly.

Rikki squeezed the keys in her hand tightly. This would make things so much easier. At least she wouldn't have to bum any more rides when Mags got held up at work.

Rikki's enthusiasm faded at the end of the school day. As per usual, the rain had begun to fall just a few minutes after the ending bell. Rikki had hurried straight to her locker and then towards the exit, but a light drizzle had already begun to fall. Rikki reluctantly stuck her car keys in her pocket. There was absolutely no way she could make it through the student lot and into her car before she changed, and even if she did, there really wasn't room in the tiny car for a mermaid tail to appear. Plus, someone might see her.

Rikki sighed before heading back towards Mr. Cruz's room. She had taken to helping him clean up the classroom while she waited for Mags to show up, and though she really liked her teacher, she was anxious to get home to study for an English exam.

"Is your Aunt late again?" Mr. Cruz glanced up as Rikki walked in.

"Um, yeah..." Rikki lied as she pulled a broom from the closet in the corner.

"Well I'm glad." Mr. Cruz stood, cutting into the tape sealing a large box in front of him. "I'm glad to have the company. And I wanted to show you this."

"What is it?" Rikki abandoned her sweeping and stood beside his desk.

"I thought we could work on this in class." Mr. Cruz reached into the box and pulled out a large glass tank. "It's an aquarium." He said, shooting Rikki a lopsided grin. "The fish arrive tomorrow, today I just need to get it all set up and get the water ready to support them."

"Wow..." Rikki examined the habitat at the bottom of the tank. It was delicate and intricate, with tons of stone and pathways for the fish to swim through. "This is really cool."

"I'm pretty stoked." Mr. Cruz set the tank onto the counter in the back of the room. "I just have to fill it with water and monitor the PH balance, and then I'll be headed out of here. "I don't suppose you'd like to help me out?"

"No problem." Rikki ran her fingers around the edge of the elaborate glass. She couldn't wait to see it all filled and full of life.

"Great." Mr. Cruz handed her a white cloth. "Wipe it down right quick, I'm going to go get some water."

Perfectly aware that once he started to fill it she would have to get out of the way, Rikki obediently began to wipe down the interior of the tank. Mr. Cruz returned a few minutes later, carrying two heavy pails of water. Rikki was careful to step back as the water sloshed out onto the counter after Mr. Cruz set them down.

"So, Mr. Cruz, what kind of fish will we be getting?" She sat in one of the empty desks as she watched him filling the tank.

"You know, Rik, call me Hadley." He flashed her a smile before turning back to the tank. "I spend more time hanging out with you than pretty much anyone else, you can call me by my first name. Just don't tell anybody." He winked. "And it's a surprise. You'll just have to wait and see. Hey, hand me that water pump?"

Rikki picked the plastic black contraption off of his desk and carried it over.

"Be careful." Mr. Cruz said absently as he plugged in the motor. "I tested that pump out last night, it may still have some residual water inside."

The warning came too late. As Rikki held the pump out to Mr. Cruz, water poured out of the top and all over Rikki's hand.

Rikki gasped sharply, dropped the pump immediately, and raced out of the door.

"Rikki? Are you alright?" Mr. Cruz called after her.

Rikki didn't know where to go. She ran desperately through the hall, searching for somewhere to hide. She spotted a utility closet and pulled hard on the door, but it was locked tight. The girl's room was too far away, and she saw nowhere to go. Terrified, she pushed open the nearest classroom door and ran to the back of the room, behind the teacher's desk. A half a second later the familiar sensation swept over her. She fell onto the cool tile, certain that she could hear her heart beating louder than it was.

It took her a second to realize that she wasn't in the room alone. A pair of footsteps echoed through the doorway and into the room, stopping just a few feet away from Rikki.

There was no way to hide. Her upper body may be behind the desk, but her fin was in full view of whoever had just walked in. Rikki was at a loss, she had no idea what to do. She couldn't dry herself off from this position laying on her stomach, she would have to flip to her

back.

The footsteps moved closer as Rikki managed to flip herself onto her back. She squeezed her eyes closed, taking a long deep breath before opening them to face the footsteps.

Mr. Cruz stood over her, staring down at her with wide eyes. He stood frozen for several seconds, looking in awe at Rikki's tail. Slowly, he crouched down beside her, moving very close to her.

"How..." He breathed, his brow furrowed. His face was full of concern as his eyes met Rikki's. "Are you ok?"

Rikki tensed as she heard a couple students making their way down the hall. Mr. Cruz quickly dashed to the classroom door and pushed it shut, turning the lock so that no one could wander in.

Rikki quickly held a hand out over herself and dried her scales. She jumped to her feet, but stood far from Mr. Cruz, who looked utterly amazed at what had just happened. He walked toward her slowly, not blinking and completely confused.

"Mr. Cruz, I can explain." Rikki said breathlessly. "Please, just hear me out and don't tell anyone what you-"

Mr. Cruz held one hand up, silencing her. Rikki tried to keep herself from completely freaking out as he composed his words.

"Rikki," His voice was hoarse and quiet as he managed to speak. "I really think you need to start calling me Hadley."

4. Trust

Rikki stood silently, trying to read her teacher's expression. Hadley also stood still without speaking, staring hard at Rikki. It occurred to her that he wasn't looking at her in disgust or in fright. His eyes were filled with nothing but concern.

"Are you hurt?" He broke the silence. "I mean, did it hurt when you..." His eyes dropped to the floor where she'd fallen.

"I'm fine." Rikki said quickly, awkwardly crossing her arms.

"What... what are you?" Hadley moved very close to her, speaking barely loud enough for Rikki to hear him.

Rikki drew in a shuddering breath, using all of her nerve to look Hadley in the eye. Her nerve quickly failed her.

"We can't talk about this here." She whispered, casting a nervous look around the classroom.

"Ok." Hadley seemed to agree with her. He stuck his hand into his pocket and dug out a set of keys. He carefully removed a gold one and held it out towards Rikki. "You can talk to me." He said gently, leaning in a little closer. "This is my house key. I live at 826 Briar Grove Road. Right close to you." He lightly touched her shoulder. "Meet me there? I want to know what just happened... what I

saw." He paused. "I want to know everything."

Rikki nervously took the key from him. "I'm not sure I can tell you..."

"And that's ok." Hadley held both her shoulders in his tanned hands. "Listen, I'll bet you could use someone to talk to. I'll be home all night. Come by any time." He smiled slightly. "Don't worry. I'm not going to say a word."

Rikki felt touched and slightly overwhelmed by Hadley's kindness towards her. She held up the key. "How will you get in?"

"Spare key under the mat." He winked.

A knock at the classroom door startled the two of them.

Rikki immediately rushed to the door, twisted the lock, and disappeared through it, not bothering to see who it was that had knocked. She turned Hadley's key over and over in her hand as she walked down the hall. She felt conflicted, unsure of if she should go to his house or not. She knew she owed him some kind of explanation, but how could she sit down with someone she barely knew and talk about her deepest secret?

It only took Rikki another second to make her decision. Hadley could have called for people to come see her laying on the floor with a fin. He could have demanded an explanation or attempted to blackmail her. But he hadn't. He'd been a good friend to her. Rikki started her car and pointed it towards 826 Briar Grove Road.

* * *

><p>It was a small brick house, single story. Rikki parked across the street and climbed out of her car, looking up at it. The key was hot in her hand as she walked up the front path, and it turned easily in the lock.<p>

"Hello?" Rikki called, but no one answered. It appeared that she had beaten Hadley home. She wandered into the living room and over to a mantle that held several framed photographs. Most of them appeared to be of family members, with smiling faces in every one.

Rikki heard jingling and turned to see a great big brown lab jogging towards her. "You must be Dave." She knelt, rubbing the dog behind its ears. It automatically laid down on the floor in front of her clearly waiting for Rikki to rub its tummy.

"He's a terrible guard dog." Hadley stepped through the front door. "But he's a top-notch companion." He held up a pizza box. "Do you like pepperoni?"

* * *

><p>Ten minutes later, Hadley and Rikki were settling down onto his comfy couch, plates of pizza balanced on their laps. Rikki glanced up at her teacher out of the corner of her eye, before looking back down at her dinner.<p>

"So tell me about Australia." Hadley began casually.

Rikki looked at him, confused, for a moment, but he just looked at her as if everything was normal. "It's... great." She said with a shrug, waiting for him to begin asking about what had happened at the school.

"That's it?" He laughed a bit. "It's great? Come on, Rikki. Tell me more. I've always wanted to visit, but I've never made it."

"Ok..." Rikki didn't know why he was interested, but she had no problem reliving Australian life for a while. "High school is a lot like here, just... a lot easier to deal with..." She began.

"I'll bet." Hadley nodded. "You don't seem to enjoy being the new girl in town, huh?"

"Not a bit." Rikki said grimly. "I don't have a ton of friends back home, but the ones I have are the best friends I've ever had. They're pretty great."

"I believe it. More pizza?" Hadley moved out to the kitchen.

"Listen, Mr. Cruz... Hadley..." Rikki stood, unable to wait any longer. "I really appreciate you not saying anything to anyone, and how cool you're being, but..." She took a couple slow steps towards him. "I know you're going to ask me about what you saw. Can we just get it over with?"

Hadley looked up at her, a slightly hurt expression on his face. "I wasn't going to ask you anything about what happened in the school today." He sat back down on the couch. "I was hoping you'd tell me about it eventually, but I'm not going to put any pressure on you."

"Don't you want to know?" Rikki couldn't help but ask, moving closer to him.

"Of course I do." He grinned at her. "In fact, I'm kinda dying to know about everything. But based on what I saw..." He swallowed. "I know it must be an insanely huge secret."

"Yeah, it is." Rikki replied softly, surprised that she was even confirming this much.

Hadley leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Growing up in my family, we all had to work hard for everything we had." He looked off into the distance as he remembered. "Grades, money, nothing came easy for us. Except for friendships." He seemed to look straight through Rikki. "I know what it's like to have a close circle of friends." He smiled. "You are my friend, Rikki, and I'm not going to rush you."

Maybe it was the warm way he smiled at her. Maybe it was the subtle way he reminded her of her friends back home, Rikki didn't know.

"It happened about two and a half years ago." She heard herself saying.

* * *

><p>"I'm sorry, sir, what was the name?"<p>

"Rikki. Chadwick." Nick repeated irritably.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have no publicly released information listed under than name." The operator reported.

"No phone number? Address?" Nick pushed.

"I'm sorry, _sir_." The lady said firmly. "I cannot release any information."

"Fine." Nick hung up the phone with a huff and then immediately picked it back up. "Hello." He said when the person on the other end picked up. "I'm looking for contact information for a girl named Rikki Chadwick. She's Australian."

* * *

><p>"This is amazing." Hadley breathed.<p>

Rikki blushed slightly. They'd been talking for about an hour now. Well, _she'd_ been talking. Hadley had been listening in rapt attention, like a child being told a story.

"So... every time you touch water..." His voice trailed off.

"I change." Rikki whispered, even though they were alone in the house. She was waiting to feel panicked or scared that her secret was no longer hers, but it felt strangely good to be able to talk to someone.

"Into...?" Hadley patiently waited for her to answer.

Rikki took a deep breath. She'd told Hadley about getting stuck out at Mako Island on a full moon (though she'd been careful to leave out Cleo and Emma.) She'd told Hadley all about Lewis and her other friends who knew the secret. She'd told him a whole lot. She had completely described what happened every time she touched water, but neither of them had been brave enough to say the 'M' word yet. She looked at Hadley, who was still waiting for her to answer him.

"I change into a mermaid." She said finally, waiting in fear for Hadley's reaction.

"Wow." Hadley anxiously ran his hands through his hair, standing to pace to the other side of the room, deep in thought. "So you're telling me that you are a real life, honest to goodness mermaid?"

"Kinda?" Rikki grimaced, still waiting to see how he would handle the news.

Hadley's face lit up. He jumped back onto the couch next to Rikki, grabbing her hand tightly. "Rikki, this is so _cool_. I mean, I've always hoped that there was more to life than just us humans, I've always believed that there was more out there." He smiled, breathing hard. "And here you are. A mermaid." His face moved very close to hers as he gently rubbed his right thumb over Rikki's

knuckles.

Rikki's hand felt electric under Hadley's. She suddenly found herself short on breath as she looked into his brown eyes.

"I should really be getting home soon." She stood, awkwardly pulling her hand away and sticking it into her pocket.

Hadley's face fell momentarily, but he quickly composed himself. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea." He said sheepishly, also standing and also (Rikki noticed) shoving his hands into his pockets.

"So... you probably already know this, but" Rikki looked to him nervously. "Please don't tell anyone."

"Not if my life depended on it." Hadley said solemnly, without a trace of humor in his eyes. "Do you think, um..." He suddenly seemed nervous, almost shy. "Do you think maybe tomorrow you could show me?"

"Oh, um..." Rikki's blush darkened. "I don't really know where we could go, the beach is kinda too public." She immediately flashed back to her near discovery, shivering slightly.

"What if I had access to the training pool up at the university?" Hadley had an excited glint in his eye.

"Won't there be people? Or cameras?" Rikki asked.

"No, not at the training pool." Hadley's hopefulness grew. "And it's the off-season for swimmers, no one else will be there." He couldn't keep from smiling as he waited for Rikki's answer.

"I'll think about it, ok?" Rikki said hesitantly. She decided she would sleep on it and see how she felt in the morning.

"Fair enough." Hadley didn't look disappointed. He seemed preoccupied, lost in the thrill of the moment for now.

Hadley walked Rikki to his front door, they both paused once they reached it.

Rikki pulled his house key from her pocket and held it out towards him.

"Keep it." Hadley closed his hand over hers, trapping the key within her fingers. "I'm sure things must be a little strained at your Aunt's, or maybe you just need somewhere to escape to sometimes. You're welcome here anytime you want."

"Thank you." Rikki truly hoped Hadley could tell how much she meant those words. After a moment of hesitation she gave him a tentative hug, resting her head on his shoulder for just a moment before pulling away.

"So I'll see you tomorrow, then?" She said as she stepped out onto his front stoop.

"You betcha." Hadley winked at her before closing the door.

The ride home to her Aunt's felt hours long, though it couldn't have been longer than five minutes.

"Hey sweetie, did you have any trouble finding your way home?" Mags called.

Rikki didn't hear her. As if in a trance, she went straight up to her room and flopped down onto the bed, completely lost in her thoughts. It was like she couldn't focus on one thought at a time, they were all flying through her head at once. Her secret was out. She should be panicking, but she felt strangely calm. She'd only known Hadley a bit over a week, but she felt an inexplicable comfort around him, like she just knew she could trust him.

Rikki flipped to her back, staring up at her ceiling. Something else was bothering her, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Suddenly, it dawned on her. she knew exactly what was eating at her conscience.

She felt guilty. She felt really guilty, and for more than one reason.

Number one, she felt guilty that she'd been discovered so easily. What would Bella and Cleo say if they knew just how easily she'd given up their secret? Sure, Rikki hadn't told Hadley about either of the other mermaids, but the secret was still out.

Next, Rikki realized that she felt guilty for an entirely different reason.

Zane.

Today, with Hadley, she'd felt something she'd never experienced before, not even with Zane. Today Hadley had been totally and completely accepting of her. In fact, he'd been even more enthusiastic once he'd learned her secret. Sure, Zane was supportive, and Rikki knew he would always be there for her, but he knew that deep down he'd always wished that she could be normal. Zane wanted to be able to go about his day without worrying about having to protect her. Today with Hadley it had just felt... different.

"Cut it out, Rikki." She muttered under her breath. "Zane has been your boyfriend for over a year. You've known Hadley just over a week. And he's your teacher."

Rikki rolled over and switched off the lamp on her nightstand. It was ridiculously early to be going to sleep, but he just needed to stop thinking for a while.

5. A little rain

The next morning Rikki woke up with a fresh case of butterflies in her stomach. Was she really going to go to the pool today with Hadley? Rikki got ready for school quickly before dashing down the steps.

"Well _someone_ is awfully excited for school this morning." Mags looked up from her coffee as Rikki grabbed a banana from the pantry. "I told you you'd like it here if you just gave it a little time."

"Uh huh." Rikki said vaguely as she tossed her backpack across her shoulder. "I might be home a little later than usual." She said quickly before ducking out the door.

"Nice seeing you too!" Mags called after the slammed door before returning to her morning paper.

Rikki swung her car into a parking space in the student lot, realizing for the first time just how early she was. There were only a few other cars scattered around the lot.

Sitting alone in her car, Rikki took a few minutes to reevaluate her decision. Hadley had been so nice and so supportive, didn't she owe him the one thing he'd asked for? For her to show him? But _still_... A troublesome thought worked its way into her brain. Hadn't this all been way too easy? A complete stranger finds out what she is and is totally ok with it? And not just ok with it, but is excited? What if she dove into the pool and Hadley immediately whipped out a camera? How did she know she could trust him?

Rikki walked into the building, lost deep in her thoughts. The more she thought about it, the more she knew she couldn't go to the pool with Hadley. It would be like throwing away all the work she and her friends had put into keeping the secret.

"Hey."

Rikki jumped in surprise as someone touched her shoulder. She turned around to see Nick standing behind her.

"This fell out of your bag." Nick held a pencil out to her.

"Oh, thanks." Rikki mumbled, taking it from him.

Nick immediately turned and walked away without a second glance. Rikki watched him go, glad he hadn't hung around any longer.

The day went by too quickly for Rikki's taste. For once she would have preferred the normally endless classes, though today they flew by in a flash. She saw Hadley in the hallway once, but quickly turned in the other direction to avoid him. Eventually the bell rang and Rikki knew that she could avoid him no longer. She walked slowly into his classroom, taking her usual seat near the front of the room.

"Hello, class." Hadley bustled in, pushing a large cart in front of him. His eyes flickered over Rikki but did not linger any longer than usual. He grabbed what looked like a bag of flour and held it up in the air. "For the next two weeks you're all going to be parents!" He announced.

The class collectively groaned, but Hadley held up a hand to silence them.

"Hey now," He said with a grin. "You really should be thanking me."

Other teachers have made their classes parent eggs, or worse, those baby dolls who cry and spit up. All you guys have to worry about is a bag of flour and, let's face it, it's pretty hard to mess up one of these."

"C'mon, Mr. Cruz." Braylie, a brunette two years younger than Rikki called out. "Why do we have to do it at all?"

"Ah, far be it from me to deny you all one of the staples of Life Skills class." Hadley sat easily on the corner of his desk. "Taking care of a fake baby has been a main point of Life Skills class ever since I was in high school... which was only four years ago, but still. You guys get to enjoy it just like I did."

The class resumed their grumbling, but Hadley didn't seem to notice. "Listen up!" He called. "These will be your partners for this parental experiment. Allen, you're with Carly. Brad with Braylie, Nick with Rikki..."

Rikki's spirits immediately sank as she looked across the room at Nick. He didn't seem any happier than she was about the arrangement.

Hadley finished assigning the couples. "Alright, proud parents. Come claim a flour baby and then I want you to spend the rest of the period completing these lists." He held up a sheet of paper. "Write down your baby's gender, name, personality traits, etcetera. Hand it in before today's bell. And work together." He said in a mock stern tone.

Rikki reluctantly carried her notebook over to Nick's desk, since he didn't seem to be interested in moving.

"Fill in whatever you want." Nick pushed the page over towards her. "I don't care what you write."

Rikki frowned as she felt an all too familiar stubbornness settling in. "No." She said firmly. "I will not be doing all the work. We're supposed to be doing this together." She pushed the paper back towards the center of the desk. "Boy or girl?"

Nick sighed loudly. "I don't care. Boy."

"Ok, boy." Rikki wrote it down. "Any ideas on his name?"

"I answered the first question. You take this one." Nick leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Fair enough." Rikki said calmly. "We'll name him James."

"Thrilling." Sarcasm dripped from Nick's voice.

Rikki dropped her pencil on the desk, unable to keep her patience any longer. "What is your deal?"

"Excuse me?" Nick raised an eyebrow at her.

"Why are you so..." Rikki searched for the right word. "Pissed off all the time?"

"This is a stupid project." Nick stood abruptly, causing his chair to fly backwards. He grabbed his bag and marched out the door without saying a word to Mr. Cruz.

"Excuse me? Nick?" The teacher quickly followed him out into the hallway. He walked back into the classroom a moment later. "Nick isn't feeling well." Hadley announced the curious faces looking up at him. "I'm sorry, Rikki, do you mind finishing by yourself today?"

"No problem." Rikki smiled wryly as she began hastily filling in the spaces on the page.

The bell rang some time later. Rikki had finished the assignment a while ago and tucked the bag of flour into her backpack. The rest of the time she'd spent deep in thought, trying to figure out the best way to let Hadley down. She lingered at Mr. Cruz's desk as the rest of the students filed out of the classroom.

"Hello, Rikki." Hadley sat behind the desk, gathering his things. "Are you doing alright?"

"Listen, Hadley, I'm really sorry, but-" Rikki began, unable to wait any longer, but was stopped by Hadley, who silenced her by holding up one hand.

"You don't need to say anything." Hadley shook his head. "I've given it a lot of thought, and I wanted to talk to you." He folded his hands, looking down at them for a moment before he spoke. "I owe you an apology. Yesterday was a pretty huge day for me, and I got carried away. It wasn't fair for me to ask anything of you, much less an explanation or a demonstration." He looked up at her, his eyes honest. "You don't know me. How about we get to know each other a little bit more, just as friends, and then maybe eventually you'll be comfortable enough around me to show me more about... well, you know." He said sheepishly. "Is that alright?"

"Thank you." Rikki felt overwhelmed with appreciation. "That's really awesome of you, Hadley."

"Tell you what." Hadley stood, looking outside at the impending black clouds. "It's going to start raining any moment now, if it hasn't already. How about you let me pull your car around for you? I'll pull it into the covered way out at the back entrance."

"That would be seriously great." Rikki didn't know what to say to tell him just how glad she was to have him around.

Hadley held out a hand, waiting for Rikki to give him her keys. She did, and the two of them walked towards the back of the school, making easy conversation along the way.

"So what do you major in in college to teach Life Skills?" She asked him with a grin.

"Ah..." Hadley shook his head. "The wonders of the public school system. I majored in Biological Data, got straight A's, and then got hired to teach teenagers how to take care of bags of flour. Great, right?"

Rikki waited inside the door as Hadley headed outside.

"So you've got teachers chaufferring you around now?" A voice came from just behind her.

Rikki whipped around to see Nick walking towards her. "I thought you left." She said sharply.

"You thought wrong." Nick said snidely, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I thought wrong?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest. "How old are you, twelve?" She reached into her backpack and pulled out James. "Here." She thrust it towards Nick. "I did all the work today. You can take the first night. You have to make notes on the times you feed him and change him."

For the first time, Nick smiled. It was bitter, but it was a smile. "You actually expect me to pretend to feed a bag of flour?"

"I don't care what you do." Rikki smirked. "But if you make me get a bad grade on such a stupid assignment I swear I'll make you sorry."

"I'm terrified." Nick rolled his eyes. "You know..." He paused. "Maybe we should spend some time together. You know, get to know each other a little better. For the project." He added.

"Nick, you take tonight. I'll take tomorrow night. We'll switch off on the weekends." Rikki saw her car pulling into the drive. "I see no reason to spend any time with you other than when it's absolutely necessary." She pushed through the door and went outside.

"Here you go." Hadley stepped out of the car, leaving the door open for Rikki.

"Thanks so much." Rikki stopped him. "It's raining, would you like a ride to your car?"

"Nah, that's ok." Hadley smiled warmly at her. "It's only a little water." He winked before heading back into the school.

* * *

><p>Mags wasn't at home when Rikki arrived, but she'd left a note on the refrigerator with instructions for how to make dinner. Rikki easily set the oven and then settled at the kitchen table to work on her math homework. Her phone rang loudly.<p>

"Hello?" She answered.

"Rikki!" A familiar voice sounded distant from the other end.

"Lewis?" Rikki checked her watch. "What time is it there? How are you guys, I miss you all-"

"Rikki, shhh." Lewis cut her off hastily. "Look, you need to listen. You'll never guess who's just signed on to do a residency at Palm

University."

"Who?" Rikki's brow knit together, Palm was the college right down the road, the one she was supposed to have visited with Hadley. Lewis sounded a little panicked, which worried her.

"Dr. Denman." Lewis said breathlessly. "She's visiting the university as a guest of some science whiz who's working at one of the schools nearby. She'll be visiting the local high schools giving lectures on life in the ocean. Rikki..." He said nervously. "She's literally going to be working less than a mile from you, the college is just up the street from your school. She'll probably be visiting your school. You've _got _ to be careful."

"Wow, Lewis, thanks so much for letting me know." Rikki immediately felt her forehead break out in a cold sweat. "I'll keep an eye out, I promise. How do you know she's up here?"

"I've been following her webpage ever since she caught you girls a few years ago." Lewis answered. "She's been in residency at a scientific research facility in California, but she broke it off to come to Florida. It seems to have been pretty spur of the moment. She'll arrive in Florida this weekend, I'm not sure how long she's staying. She thinks you're an ordinary high schooler again." Lewis continued. "But still be careful."

"I will, I promise." Rikki said seriously. "Lewis..." She paused. "You said she was invited here? By someone who works at a school nearby?"

"That's right."

"Who was it?" Rikki's mind was racing. "The person who invited Dr. Denman?"

"Umm... one second." Lewis could be heard flipping through pages of paper. "Some guy named Cruz. Hadley Cruz." He waited. "Rikki? Are you there? Rikki?"

Rikki dropped her phone onto the tile floor, where it smashed into pieces.

6. Unexpected Places

Rikki felt like she'd been pacing for hours, and maybe she had. She felt restless, anxious. Why had Hadley invited Dr. Denman to the university? And why _now_? Rikki wrung her fingers as she walked, trying not to panic. Maybe Hadley inviting Dr. Denman had nothing to do with her. It might just be a totally random coincidence, right?

With a sigh, Rikki dropped onto her bed. She was such an _idiot_. Why had she thought for even a second that she could trust her biggest secret to a complete and total stranger?

Rikki desperately wished she could walk outside and dive out into the ocean. There was nothing like a swim to relieve stress, but she knew that that wasn't a smart idea. Not with Dr. Denman on her way.

Making up her mind, Rikki headed downstairs and pulled her keys from their hook beside the door. She needed to buy a new phone, hers had broken beyond repair when she'd dropped it. She pulled open her front door and almost walked straight into the person standing on the other side of it.

"Nick?" She stepped back. "What in the world are you doing here?"

Nick looked just as surprised as she was to see her standing there. "You live here?" He frowned.

"Uh, yeah?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest. "You didn't answer me. What are you doing at my house? Why were you lurking outside my front door?"

"I was just getting ready to ring the doorbell. Does a Mags Fairwell live here?" Nick read the name off of the box he held in front of him.

"She's my Aunt." Rikki said warily. "Did you- are you stalking me?"

Nick scoffed. "Don't give yourself so much credit, Chadwick. My mom works with your Aunt, apparently. She asked me to drop these case studies off for Ms. Fairwell to look over for her."

"Oh, really." Rikki clenched her jaw. "Doesn't that sound a little bit _convenient_, Nick? You just happening to show up at _my_ house?"

"Get over yourself, princess." Nick smirked. "We just moved here. My mom just wants to get a second opinion on these cases before she sends them to her superior."

Rikki took a step back, gesturing for Nick to carry the box inside. "Sorry." She said eventually. "I've had a stressful day, I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

Nick dropped the box onto the kitchen counter with a loud thump. "You must be stressed all the time, because you're usually ticked off at me for something or other."

"_Me_?" Rikki slammed the front door shut. "I'm mad at you?" She laughed humorlessly. "You're angry at me all the time. You've never said so much as one word to me that wasn't dripping with sarcasm or jerk-ness."

"Jerk-ness?" Nick raised one eyebrow at her. "You must get straight A's in English. Or maybe that's a real word in Australia."

"See?" Rikki said shrilly. "That's what I'm talking about! You're such a jerk all the time!"

"Maybe you should call Mr. Cruz, I'm_ sure_ he'd be glad to make you feel all better." Nick shot back.

Rikki's anger deflated as she sank into a kitchen chair. For just a moment she'd forgotten all about Hadley and Dr. Denman, but now

everything came rushing back. "I'll make sure Mags sees the case studies." She nodded towards the box.

"No..." Nick dropped into the chair opposite her. "It's no fun if you don't fight back. Your line is 'Shut up, Nick. There's nothing going on between me and my teacher.'" He waited for her to speak.

Rikki let out a long sigh. "Just go home Nick. Or go anywhere, I really don't care."

"Wait, is there seriously something going on between you and Cruz?" Nick frowned.

"What? No!" Rikki stood up abruptly, marching over to the front door and pulling it open. "There's nothing going on between me and Had-Mr. Cruz." She swallowed. "Now get out."

"Unbelievable." Nick stood, an expression of disgust on his face. He stalked out the door without another word.

Rikki slammed it shut behind him. She didn't need anything else to worry about right now, she already had plenty of things to figure out.

* * *

><p>Rikki didn't get any sleep that night. She kept herself occupied learning how to work her new cell phone, but she couldn't manage to get relaxed enough to sleep. She found herself wide awake before the sun even rose, and decided to go ahead and get ready for school. Rikki made it downstairs before Mags had even woken up, so she grabbed a banana, wrote Mags a quick note, and ducked out the door.<p>

The path to the house was just beginning to catch the early rays of sunlight as Rikki approached Hadley's front door. She took a deep breath and knocked loudly. It was several seconds before Hadley pulled it open.

"Rikki?" He said, confused. He had a towel thrown across his shoulders, his hair still dripping from the shower. He wore a pair of black sweatpants with no shirt, giving Rikki a clear view of his uncommonly toned stomach. "Are you ok? It's..." He leaned back to check his clock. "Six thirty in the morning."

"I know, I'm sorry." Rikki apologized. "But I needed to talk to you, it can't wait."

"Come on in." Hadley stepped back to let her inside. "What's wrong?" He gestured for her to take a seat at the kitchen table, a concerned look on his face.

"Ok." Rikki composed herself as she sat down. "I've been thinking about this over and over, and I think the best thing for me to do is to just come right out and ask you."

"Ask me anything." Hadley's face was open, honest.

Rikki swallowed. Now that she was here her nerve seemed to be failing her. Or maybe it was Hadley's brown eyes that seemed to look straight

through her. "You've invited Dr. Denman to the university. To Palm U."

Whatever Hadley had been expecting her to say, it certainly wasn't that. "What? Dr. Denman?"

"Don't deny it, Hadley." Rikki spoke a tad more forcefully than she meant to. "I know you invited her here."

"I'm not denying anything." Hadley's eyes widened. He sat back, putting both hands in the air in surrender. "Yes, I invited Linda Denman to do a residency at the University. What's the problem? Why are you so upset?"

Rikki examined his expression, unable to determine if he was really as clueless as he seemed. "Why? Why did you call for her?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"She used to be a student of my mother's." Hadley shrugged. "We've been friends for ages, but I never get to see her because she does most of her work in other countries. She's from Australia, you know. So I heard she was in California and I gave her a call. Palm's resident biology professor had just cancelled last minute and they needed someone to fill in." He frowned. "Rikki, what in the world is this all about?"

Rikki couldn't tell if she felt relief or suspicion. How did she know he was being truthful with her?

"I know Dr. Denman." She said finally. There was no point in keeping it from him. If he had sent for Denman in order to trap her then he already knew about their past. And if he didn't know, he should.

"You do?" Hadley picked up a white shirt from a basket of clothes and began to button it. "How? Like you're familiar with her work, you mean?"

"No, I mean I know her." Rikki said firmly. "And she knows me. But you knew that already, didn't you? Admit it, Hadley." She shot him a withering look.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa..." Hadley leaned forward on the table, resting his weight on his hands. "Admit what? You've caught me totally blindsided here, Rikki."

"Dr. Denman knew about me." Rikki said loudly, also standing. "She had underwater cameras installed in the ocean and she caught a picture of me swimming." Rikki spoke carefully, being sure to omit her friends from the story. "Then your friend Linda captured me and tried to run tests on me. She was going to tell the world about what I am, Hadley." Rikki could feel her pulse racing as her anger grew. The memories were painful to relive, it was one of the only times she'd been truly scared.

"Really?" Hadley sounded shocked by the news. He stared off into space, his eyes not focusing on anything. He finally managed to look up at Rikki. "How did you convince her not to go public?"

"I didn't." Rikki answered bitterly. "I managed to trick her into

thinking I had given up my mermaid abilities. She thought I was just an ordinary teenager again. I was of no further use to her then, not after she found out I was _ordinary_."

"How could Linda do such a thing?" Hadley seemed lost in his thoughts as he held his head in his hands. "Rikki, I've known her for years. She's a brilliant researcher. A little cutthroat, sure, but I can't believe she'd ever do something to hurt someone."

Rikki found herself taken aback by the expression on Hadley's face. She'd been prepared not to believe him, and she wanted to be angry with him, but he seemed truly shocked by the news. "You really didn't know?" She sat gingerly beside him on the couch.

"I swear." Hadley placed a hand over hers, looking Rikki dead in the eye. "She's just a friend that I invited to Florida to give a few lectures. I had no idea she had history with you."

"And you didn't tell her anything about me?" Rikki was all too aware of how warm his hand felt on top of hers.

"Nothing. Not a word." Hadley squeezed her fingers in his. "And Rikki," His tone deepened. "Even if you weren't a mermaid... there'd be nothing ordinary about you."

Rikki's face flushed a deep scarlet as she looked up at Hadley's face. The moment felt electric between them as they sat in silence, looking into each other's eyes.

"I should go." Rikki ended the moment, quickly pulling her hand from Hadley's.

"Yeah, me too." Two spots of color appeared on Hadley's cheeks. "Wow, look at the time. I've got to finish getting ready. Listen, don't worry about Linda. I mean, Dr. Denman. She won't even know you're here, I promise." He said sincerely as he walked Rikki to the front door.

"Sorry for freaking out on you." Rikki spoke sheepishly, pausing at the door.

"Don't stress, ok?" Hadley gave her a boyish smile, his hair falling in front of his eyes as he leaned on the doorframe. "Everything will be fine. You can trust me."

Before she could stop herself, Rikki threw her arms around Hadley's waist and held him to her tightly. It was completely impulsive, but she really just needed to be held for a moment. It felt so unbelievably comforting, being embraced by such strong, warm arms. He hugged her back, rocking back and forth ever so slightly.

After a moment Rikki came to her senses. The was completely inappropriate behavior, he was probably totally wierded out. She immediately released her grip, taking an awkward step backwards as she did so.

"I, um, I'm sorry." Rikki stammered. "That was a mistake, I just needed a hug, I guess. I-"

Hadley had an odd look on his face as he looked at her. Suddenly, in

one fluid movement, he stepped forward, took Rikki's face in both of his hands, and pressed his lips against hers. It was a rough kiss, but at the same time so gentle. Rikki felt a rush of emotion as he kissed her, and it was all too easy to relax into the kiss and return it. All of the stress from the last few days seemed to melt away as Hadley's lips gently parted hers. As far as stress relief went, this was even better than swimming.

At the exact same time the pair stepped back, away from one another. Hadley's face was a mixed expression of embarrassment and horror.

"Rikki, I apologise." He pleaded with her. "That was completely out of line. I don't know what happened, I just got carried away, please don't-"

"It's ok." Rikki stumbled through the front door, slowly walking backwards towards her car. "Don't worry about it. I'll, uh, see you in class?"

Rikki turned to get into her vehicle, trying, but not succeeding, to keep the smile from spreading across her face.

* * *

><p>Just so that everyone knows, I'm figuring Rikki is 18 (almost 19 if she was old for her school year, which she probably was because she moved a lot) and Hadley is just barely 22. So I hope no one is grossed out or anything, but I don't want you guys picturing some weirdo old guy trying to take advantage of a kid. I hope that makes sense.

As always, thanks so much to all of you for reading and reviewing. I really appreciate you taking the time to send me a few words. I hope everyone is well! :)

S.

7. Mapping Out and Breaking Down

It took less than ten minutes for Rikki's happy glow to wear off and for nausea to set in. What had she just done? Why had she done it? And, most importantly, what was she supposed to do now?

Zane.

The name crashed into her head like a semi truck. Rikki remembered all too well the sick feeling she'd had to live with when she'd caught Zane kissing Sophie behind her back. Now, not only had she done the same thing, but she'd enjoyed it.

Rikki felt as if she might throw up if she kept thinking. There was only one thing she knew for sure, she wasn't going to hide this from Zane, she couldn't. Guilt consumed her, and she knew that she had to be honest with her boyfriend. It wasn't fair to Zane for her to keep him in the dark, that would make her feel worse. Almost against her will, she kept thinking about the way it had felt to Kiss Hadley. "Cut it out, Rikki." She scolded herself.

Rikki pulled into the school parking lot and turned off the car. With shaking hands she pulled her phone from her bag and dialed Zane's number. Her heart pounded loudly in her chest as she listened to it ring through to voicemail.

"Hey Zane." She spoke, trying to keep her voice even. "Listen, um, give me a call when you get this. I need to talk to you." Rikki took a deep breath. "And it's important."

She flipped the phone shut, leaning back in her seat and rubbing her temples with her fingers. The first school bell of the day rang in the distance, snapping out of her thoughts. Hastily, Rikki grabbed her book bag and sprinted towards the building.

Zane didn't return her call until two hours later. Rikki's phone lit up brightly from where she had it positioned on her desk. Immediately, her arm shot up into the air.

"May I be excused to the restroom please?" She asked a tad too loudly.

"Hey." Rikki spoke quietly into the phone a moment later, once she was safely in the hall.

"Hey." Zane answered.

Rikki immediately lost her nerve. Zane already sounded guarded, suspicious, as if he already knew this wasn't going to be a good conversation. A hot pang of guilt shot through her as she tried to stay calm.

"Thanks for calling me back." Rikki felt a lump rising in her throat as she gathered her courage. "There's something I have to talk to you about."

"And I already know what it is." Zane sighed, cutting her off. "I was wondering when she'd tell you. But honestly, Rikki, you can't listen to Cleo. She's just trying to make me look bad."

"No, Zane, that's not what I was calling... I can't listen to Cleo about what?" Rikki asked in spite of herself.

"What Cleo saw." Zane continued, sounding strained. "It wasn't a big deal, she's just blowing it way out of proportion."

"Then maybe you should just explain it to me." Rikki heard her voice tighten. She knew she had no right to be questioning him, she should just tell him what she'd called to tell him and deal with it from there. Curiosity got the better of her, however.

"At the party a couple days ago, when Cleo saw me... with that girl." Zane said slowly.

"Doing what exactly, with what girl?" Rikki began to realize what he was getting at.

"Aw, c'mon Rikki, are you really going to make me say it? Isn't this what you called about?" Zane's tone became slightly tight.

Rikki didn't answer, she was too lost in her own thoughts.

Zane let out a long exhale. "Cleo saw me kissing her." He sounded miserable as he spoke. "But listen, Rikki, it wasn't because I wanted to, I was dared to do it. There was a whole group of us goofing off, playing truth or dare, and Nate thought it would be funny. It didn't mean _anything. _I love you."

Rikki stared blankly at the wall in front of her, trying to process the emotions racing through her body. She felt an intense mixture of anger and betrayal, topped off with an overwhelming feeling of guilt so strong it was almost painful.

"Zane, stop." She said quietly, swallowing hard. "I'm... I'm not angry with you."

"You're not?" Zane said in disbelief.

"Someone kissed me." Rikki spoke quickly, before she could change her mind. "That's what I called to tell you."

Several seconds of silence passed before either of them spoke.

"Someone _kissed _ you?" Zane managed to speak first. "Who?"

Rikki's head began to pound as she opened her mouth to talk. "Someone kissed me, Zane. And I kind of kissed him back." A wave of relief flowed through her as the words left her lips. At least now he knew the truth.

"You _what_?" This time the anger was clear in Zane's voice.

"From what it sounds like, neither of us have been faithful." Rikki shot back at him. "Would you have even told me about that party if Cleo hadn't seen you?"

"But it didn't mean anything!" Zane fumed. "It was a game, I got dared to do it. It lasted two seconds!"

"Yeah, and I'll bet you needed a whole lot of convincing, right?" Rikki lost her temper.

"About as much as you did!" Zane yelled back.

The two panted in silence, both furious.

"So I guess that's it then." Rikki choked out.

"No, no, stop." Zane said quickly. "Rikki, we both messed up. We'll work through this."

"I don't want to." Rikki said softly.

"What?" Zane's voice was tense over the phone's speaker.

"I need a break, Zane." Rikki felt numb as she spoke. "Don't call me." She clicked her phone closed without waiting for a response.

She knew perfectly well that she had absolutely no right to be angry

with Zane, and that fact made her even more upset with herself.

Rikki looked at the now silent phone in her hand, almost unable to believe what had just happened. She'd intended to confess to Zane and then immediately beg his forgiveness. But now... She didn't want that. For the first time in a long time, she realized that what she felt for Zane had cooled. She still missed him, but there was so much about him that she didn't want to be around anymore. The truth was that the kiss between Hadley and her would never have happened if she was still in love with Zane.

The bell rang, bringing her out of her trance. Rikki took a moment to pull herself together, then hurried back towards class to collect her books.

The day passed by unbearably slowly. Rikki didn't even bother pretending to pay attention in her classes. Zane called her three times, but she ignored him each time. There was nothing left to talk about. Eventually it was time to head down the long hall towards Hadley's classroom. Her pulse picked up slightly as she walked into the room. Rikki dropped into her seat, not raising her eyes to look at anyone.

"Good afternoon." Hadley spoke as he walked into the room. His eyes met Rikki's briefly before dropping down to his attendance roster. He took his time rearranging his desk before he looked up at the class. "So." He rubbed his hands together.

Rikki noticed that Hadley was careful to avoid looking her in the eyes as he spoke.

"Today we're making maps." Hadley announced. "I know, I know. When are any of you going to need to make a map? Probably never. _But_..." He grinned at all of them, though his smile wavered as it flickered over Rikki. "You'll also be learning how to navigate with compasses and longitude/latitude coordinates. And those skills, guys, you just may actually need to use someday. You'll be working in pairs. Let's keep our parents working together, shall we? By the way, how are all of our children holding up?"

There was muffled laughter as a few students held their flour bags up in the air.

"Glad to see at least a few of our children are still thriving." Hadley laughed as he pulled several boxes from his teaching cabinet. "One box per team, please. Each kit includes a digital compass, a longitude/latitude chart, list of street names in our zip code, pencils, mapping paper, everything you need. You are to sketch me a map of this school and the streets within a mile circumference around it. And be detailed!" He added.

As Hadley began demonstrating how to use the equipment, Rikki caught a look back at Nick, who had his usual look of boredom on his face.

"All right teams, get to it!" Hadley gestured to the supply kits on his desk.

As usual, Nick didn't make any effort to get up or help. With a

resigned sigh, Rikki walked up to Hadley's desk to get a supply box for the project.

"Rikki, um.." Hadley whispered as she reached him. "Do you think you could stay after class today? I really need to talk to you." His eyes darted nervously around the classroom, making sure no one was watching them. "Please, Rikki."

"Yeah, sure." Rikki muttered uneasily. "No problem." She awkwardly shoved her hands into her pockets, avoiding Hadley's piercing gaze. Nervous, she pushed her way back towards Nick's desk, dropping the supplies loudly onto the wooden surface. She reluctantly took her seat beside him, not bothering to be polite.

"What, are you and the teacher having a disagreement?" Nick muttered under his breath.

Rikki let out a long sigh before she spoke. "There is nothing at all going on between Mr. Cruz and me, Nick. Stop teasing."

"Stop teasing." Nick scoffed. "Maybe you should take your own advice."

Rikki clenched her jaw, telling herself to just ignore his rude remark. "Let's just draw this damn map, ok?" She managed to grumble.

It was like pulling teeth. Sure, Nick did his share of the calculating, but Rikki had to prompt him for every single coordinate. The class period seemed to stretch into forever. It felt like a year later, but eventually the bell rang.

"Alright, gang." Hadley called. "Turn in your completed maps and work kits to my desk, please."

Rikki cast a disappointed eye over their pathetic result. "This is crap. We're going to get a terrible grade."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get an A." Nick murmured.

"Will you please just stop?" Rikki momentarily lost her cool, raising her voice.

"What, did I touch a nerve?" A sneer spread across Nick's face. "Or is that what you and Mr. Cruz are doing?"

A hot pang of anger shot through Rikki. "You have no idea what you're talking about, you jerk." She whispered, glaring at Nick.

But Nick wasn't looking back at her. Instead, his eyes were focused past Rikki, at a cluster of students making their way up the aisle beside them, practically knocking into Rikki, who paid them no mind. Brad was flirting like crazy with Brailie, who pushed him playfully.

"Brad..." Brailie giggled. "Cut it out." She squealed as Brad pushed her back.

"Oh yeah?" Brad had a mischievous look on his face as he reached into his bag.

Rikki could hear the students giggling beside her, but she didn't have any interest in joining their fun. They seemed totally oblivious of the fact that they were being loud and obnoxious.

"How about some of this?" She heard Brad tease.

Several drops of water splashed onto the floor next to Rikki. She automatically recoiled as Brad slung the open water bottle around again at the girls. Rikki prepared to run, trying to figure a way out without getting in the way.

Suddenly, Nick was no longer seated beside her. In a flash he was standing face to face with Brad. Nick's arm was extended high above his head, and clasped tightly in his fingers was the open bottle of water that he'd just taken right out of Brad's hands. Brad, Braylie and her friends all fell immediately silent. One last solitary drop of water landed on Rikki's desk, just missing her. Her breath caught in her throat at the near miss.

"Get away from me." Nick said angrily. "Go act like preschoolers somewhere else." He dropped back into his chair, glaring at the group of students as they made their way out the door, now completely hushed.

"What just happened?" Rikki's voice was shaken, though she tried not to let it show.

"I hate Brad and his cronies." Nick muttered. "He thinks he's so damn slick." He slammed the bottle of water onto the desk.

"Yeah, well..." Rikki quickly scooted away from the water bottle. "Class is over, I should really be going."

"I'll bet." Nick shot at her as he threw his backpack across his shoulders. He walked out of the classroom without so much as a backwards glance in Rikki's direction.

"Thanks for waiting." Hadley spoke in a business-like tone as he waited for the last student to leave the classroom. As soon as they were alone he reached for Rikki's hand. "About this morning..."

Rikki shook her head. "You don't need to say anything, it's no big deal."

"Yes it is." Hadley appeared hurt at Rikki's words. "At least to me it is." His eyes locked in on Rikki's for several seconds before he shook himself out of it. "It was inappropriate behavior." His professional tone returned. "And I apologise, I only hope you can forgive me."

"Already done." Rikki smiled as relief spread over Hadley's face. "It was just a kiss, Hadley. Please don't stress over it."

"Just a kiss." Hadley chuckled, gently moving his thumb over Rikki's knuckles. "From your idiot teacher."

"I owe you an apology too." Rikki met his eyes. "Listen, I had no business showing up at your house this morning and blowing up at you."

I should have waited til I had calmed down to talk to you,
I--"

"Sh.." Hadley gently placed an index finger over Rikki's lips.
"Getting to see you first thing in the morning... I can't think of a better way to start my day."

Rikki couldn't help herself, there was something about the way Hadley's eyes made her feel warm all over that practically glued her in place. He blushed, looking away after a moment.

"I was thinking..." Rikki began, speaking slowly in case she changed her mind. "Is it too late to take you up on that swim?"

Hadley's eyes widened. "Really?"

Rikki nodded. "If you still want to go."

"Of course I do." Hadley quickly threw his bag onto his desk and began to pack it. "Now?"

"Now." Rikki felt good about her decision. She trusted Hadley and, in spite of everything, she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible. There was just something about him that made her feel safe. Plus, she was dying for a swim.

"Let me just get these kits back on the shelf." Hadley hurried around the room. "We'll be on our way to the college pool in ten minutes."

"Sounds good." Rikki breathed as a smile spread across her face. She stood up to help her friend straighten the room.

Neither of them noticed the shadow waiting just outside the classroom door, listening to every word they said. Nick clenched his jaw, tightening his fists as he took in their conversation. "I knew it." He muttered under his breath as he turned on his heel and stalked out of the school.

8. Deep water

Rikki's nerves were bouncing all over the place as she rode in the car with Hadley. He kept shooting her glances out of the side of his eye, making an effort to hide his excited smile.

"This is so cool." He said for the third time as they pulled through the tall metal gateway. "And here we are. Welcome to Palm U."

The college campus was small, but beautiful. Students were hurrying through the palm tree-lined walkways towards their classes.

"You're absolutely sure no one will see us?" Rikki asked nervously as they climbed out of the car.

"Positive." Hadley said confidently, holding up a silver key. "The university gave me a copy of the key last night, since the class is doing a swimming unit soon. We can lock the door, no one could come in even if they wanted to."

Hadley slid the key into the lock and pushed open the unmarked brown door in front of them. His expression was warm as he held the door open for Rikki to walk through. "After you, m'lady." He winked at her as she ducked past him.

The room was smaller than Rikki had pictured, with no windows and only one entrance. Inside was a small pool, maybe half the size of a full length one, but not much else.

"I guess I expected the university pool to be a bit bigger." Rikki raised her eyebrows as she looked around the bland room.

"Oh, this is just the practice pool." Hadley pulled a couple of towels from the bin and spread them out on the concrete floor. "There's a big fancy pool out by the football stadium, and that's where the meets are held. The only people who come out to this place are just looking to practice. But..." He locked the door, pulling on it to make sure it was secure. "No one will be using it today. No one but us, of course." Hadley shoved his hands into his pockets, looking suddenly self conscious. "So, um... You just touch the water?"

"Right." Rikki realised that this was it. She was about to show Hadley exactly what happened to her when she came in contact with the water. She hated to admit it, but she was dying to jump right in. It had been too long since that swim in the ocean.

"What about your clothes?" Hadley blushed immediately as the question popped out. "I mean, do you need to change or something?"

"No, ah, they'll just disappear when I change." Rikki looked down at her feet. It felt so weird to be talking so honestly about such a big secret. "So... I'll just jump in then?"

Rikki shot a long look at Hadley, checking for a camera or anything else he might use against her, but he had only brought in his keys. He sat, cross-legged, at the edge of the pool, a look of nervous anticipation on his face.

She took a long, deep breath as she stood with her toes at the edge of the pool. Then, before she could change her mind, she dove out into the water.

It was like finally getting to stretch muscles that had been cramped for too long. Rikki felt instant relief as she powered herself through the water. She swam a few quick circles in the pool, lost in her happiness, before she remembered that Hadley was watching her. Her nerves immediately returned as she surfaced, her eyes searching for Hadley. She found him a moment later, crouched at the edge of the concrete. His mouth hung open as he looked at her.

Slowly, hesitantly, Rikki swam towards him. She stopped a few feet from the edge of the pool, afraid of freaking him out. Hadley didn't move away, but he was breathing more and more heavily.

"What are you thinking?" Rikki couldn't help but ask.

Hadley shook his head, taking in a long pull of oxygen before answering. "I mean, I'd seen you like this before, but you're

absolutely breathtaking in the water. Wow."

"You're funny." Rikki swam to the pool edge, resting her elbows on the concrete beside him.

Hadley slid out to lay on his stomach, so that the two were laying face to face.

"When I was young," Hadley spoke to her quietly. "I used to tell everyone that there was more to just us humans out there, that there existed things like this. No one ever believed me. They all just said I had an overactive imagination."

"I'm sorry for that." Rikki looked at her friend, who had a pensive look on his face.

"It's alright." Hadley gave her a small smile. "I don't care what any of them said back then. This, now, makes it all worth it."

"It's nice to have someone to talk to." Rikki couldn't help but smile at him. "It reminds me of back home."

"Does anyone else know?" Hadley asked shyly. "You have to have someone to talk to, it would be miserable otherwise."

"I had a few people who knew." Rikki decided to be honest, somewhat. "And I had a boyfriend who knew."

"Had?" Hadley looked at her inquisitively.

"We broke up." It caused Rikki pain to say the words aloud.

"What was his name?" Hadley moved his hand back and forth easily through the water as he spoke.

"Zane." Rikki answered. "That was his name." She waited a few seconds, but found that she actually wanted to talk about him. "We dated a bit, and then he found out what I was."

"Is that what ended it?" Hadley rested his chin on his folded arms as he spoke.

"No, actually." Rikki smiled in spite of herself. "He handled the news like a pro. He was great."

"So what ended it?" Hadley sounded genuinely curious as he looked at her.

"It's a long story." Rikki wasn't quite ready to admit that their kiss had played a part in her decision, though she decided to let him into a bit of her thoughts. "Zane was never completely ok with what I was. He did an awesome job keeping me safe but deep down I always knew he wished I was human. It was too much in the end. We had to break it off." Rikki swallowed. She wasn't being absolutely honest, but it was enough information for one day.

"You're beautiful." Hadley said suddenly, as he looked deep into Rikki's eyes. "I'm sorry." He said, looking at her with a grin. "But you are."

"Thank you." Rikki said, embarrassed. She felt suddenly exposed, unsure of what to do next.

"You know..." Hadley's voice trailed off.

"What?" Rikki held her head up in the water, waiting for Hadley to answer her.

"Feel free to say no..." Hadley looked down at her as he pushed the hair out of his eyes. "But would you mind if I joined you in there?"

"Oh, um," Rikki twisted her fingers in the water. "Yeah, if you won't be weirded out, I-"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to make you feel uncomfortable or anything." Hadley quickly apologised, running his hands through his hair sheepishly. "It's just, when I was younger I used to have this silly dream about swimming with a mermaid so I thought..." He looked at his feet, embarrassed. "It doesn't matter, you're my student, I shouldn't be asking you to _swim_ with you, I-"

"Hadley." Rikki couldn't suppress a small smile as she watched him stumbling over his words. "I'd love the company."

Hadley didn't need any more convincing. He jumped to his feet and hurried around to the top of the pool, unbuttoning his shirt as he moved. He tossed it aside before walking down the steps into the water. He immediately dove forward, resurfacing a moment later with water streaming down his face.

"This is so amazing." He whispered as he watched Rikki swim towards him. He shook his head, sending water droplets flying as he looked down at Rikki, a sparkle in his eye. "What does it feel like? To change the way you do?"

Rikki shrugged. "Honestly, I have no idea how to describe it. But it's definitely incredible."

"Do you... want a hand?" Hadley reached his hands towards her. The water was shallow enough for Hadley to stand with his chest and shoulders out of the water, but Rikki couldn't exactly stand at all, so she was having a hard time keeping her head above water. She'd been swimming back and forth as slowly as possible, but now she took Hadley's outstretched hands in hers. He supported her weight, so that they could be face to face.

"Thank you." Rikki said, relaxing her muscles.

"Whoa..." Hadley's eyes opened wide as her tail lightly brushed against his legs.

Rikki was suddenly all too aware of the fact that they were mere inches apart from each other. Her heartbeat picked up, almost like it could beat out of her chest at any moment. Carefully, she tightened her fingers around Hadley's tanned hands.

"Rikki..." Hadley spoke quietly, bringing her out of her thoughts. "I can't thank you enough for this, for sharing this with me. It means so much to me."

"Thank you for keeping my secret." Rikki managed, though her voice shook slightly.

"You are so amazing." Hadley let go of one hand and cupped her cheek gently.

Rikki's breath caught in her throat at the warmth of his touch.

"I mean," Hadley continued, unaware of Rikki's gaze. "I'm not just saying that because you're a mermaid. You're strong, and confident, and funny..." His eyes bore into hers, making her feel like they were the last two people on earth.

For a few seconds, the only sounds in the windowless room were those of the lapping water and their heavy breathing. Looking at him, Rikki couldn't hold herself off any longer. Slowly, giving Hadley plenty of time to pull away, she placed a hand on his shoulder, carefully sliding her fingers around to the back of his neck.

Equally as hesitant, Hadley's hand dropped down to wrap around the small of Rikki's back, pulling her in even closer to him.

Rikki gasped slightly as the warm skin of his torso pressed against her own.

Hadley's eyes searched hers as he held her. "Is this... ok?" He asked shyly.

Rikki nodded, unsure of what to say now. It felt like they'd known each other forever, here in the water. Carefully, Hadley tucked a loose strand of hair behind Rikki's ear.

"Hadley..." Rikki knew exactly what she wanted to say to him, but she couldn't quite make herself speak the words.

"Yes?" Hadley's brow furrowed as he took in Rikki's serious expression. "What is it?"

The moment was just right, and Rikki couldn't hold herself off any longer. Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around Hadley's neck and kissed him. She kissed him hard, wrapping her fingers in his hair.

For just a moment her heart stopped, terrified that Hadley might break things off, but then he held her tightly, returning her kiss enthusiastically.

This was nothing like the spontaneous kiss they'd shared this morning at his front door. It was passionate, their arms grasping one another tightly as they enjoyed the feeling of skin on skin.

Hadley lifted his feet slightly, letting the two of them sink down into the water, though never breaking their kiss as they submerged.

Rikki didn't know how long they'd been together, but too soon, Hadley was pulling away from her. He roughly pushed Rikki's arms away, then he made his way to the edge of the pool, supporting himself on the concrete edge as he tried to catch his breath. Rikki watched him for

a moment before speaking.

"Why did you stop?" Rikki swam to him, trying to hide the hurt in her voice.

"Rikki..." Hadley said breathlessly. "That was... I mean, wow, that was... amazing. But..." He shook his head, closing his eyes as he did so. "I promised you I wouldn't let this happen again. It isn't right and I'm so sorry, I should never have put you in that position."

"But you didn't." Rikki couldn't bear to see him blaming himself. She reached for his hand, taking it gently in hers. "Hadley, I wanted to kiss you." She said softly. "I did. I'm the one who made the move on you. If anyone should be apologising it's me."

"No." Hadley said firmly. "I'm responsible, I'm older than you, Rikki I-"

"By four years." Rikki cut him off. "You're older by four years. That's nothing, Hadley."

"A lot can happen in four years." Hadley's voice grew louder. "Four years ago you were just a human!"

Rikki felt like she'd been slapped across the face. She was at a complete loss for words as Hadley pulled his hand from hers and climbed out of the pool.

"Look." He crouched at the edge of the water. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say it like that. All of this is... just a little overwhelming. Rikki..." His eyes were warm, though also a little sad. "I have feelings for you. In fact, it scares me how much I care about you. And it's going to be really hard but I have to try to deal with it."

"But why?" Rikki pleaded, looking up at him. "Why can't we just enjoy this time we have together? Why are you pushing me away?"

"You're supposed to feel safe with me." Hadley said gently. "You're not supposed to have to worry about your loser teacher taking advantage of you."

"But you aren't taking advantage" Rikki began.

"No, Rikki. I can't." Hadley's voice was thick with emotion. "I have to do what's right."

Rikki was crushed, and more than a little embarrassed. She'd put her feelings out there and had gotten rejected. Rikki's face was hot as she turned away from his gaze.

"I'm upset you." Hadley's voice was pained. "I'm sorry, I never intended to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't." Rikki clenched her jaw, determined not to let him see her humiliation. "Um..." She cleared her throat, unable to look him in the eye. "I'd like you to take me to my car now."

"Here, let me help you out of there." Hadley reached for Rikki's arms

but she yanked herself away from his touch.

"I can do it myself." She said harshly.

It took a while and it wasn't easy, but she managed to pull herself up the submerged steps and out onto the concrete. She laid there on her back for a moment, catching her breath.

"Here." Hadley knelt beside her, offering her a towel. "At least let me help you dry off."

"I don't need your help, Hadley." She thrust her arm out over her legs and tightened her fist. Steam immediately began rising into the air as the water quickly dried.

"Oh, right." Hadley sank back onto his heels. "I forgot you could do that."

"Well, I can." Rikki said coolly as her legs reappeared. She quickly stood, brushing off her shorts as she looked down at Hadley. "Take me to my car now, please."

"Of course." Hadley shoved his hands into his pockets as he stood.

The drive was awkward and slow. Hadley made a feeble attempt at conversation but soon gave up the effort when it became apparent that Rikki had no interest in talking. Eventually Hadley pulled into the parking spot next to her car.

"Thanks for the ride." Rikki muttered as she pushed her way out of the vehicle.

"Rikki, please, can we just talk?" Hadley called after her, but she slammed the door shut behind her without pausing.

She slammed her car into gear and pulled out onto the street. All she wanted to do was go home.

"Hey sweetie, what kept you so late?" Mags looked up from the stove as Rikki walked in the front door.

"Uh, study group." Rikki adjusted her backpack as she headed for the stairs.

"I made spaghetti!" Mags called.

"Not hungry." Rikki shut her bedroom door tightly, throwing her bag down on the bed.

For a few minutes she just paced, furious with herself for allowing her emotions to take the place of good judgement. Her thoughts went around in circles, making her even more frustrated.

"Distraction." Rikki said to herself. "Just get your mind off of it, Rikki."

Reluctantly, she dropped down at her desk and pulled her science textbook out of her bag. As she was flipping through the pages a small handwritten note fluttered out of the book and onto the desk.

Frowning, Rikki picked up the yellow piece of paper and read it.

'Rikki,
>School changed the settings on
the sprinkler system. They'll be watering
>the grounds at 12 noon every day now.
Thought you would want to know...
>just in case.
Be careful.'

Rikki read the note a second time, confused. Why had Hadley gone to the trouble of writing her a note when he could have just told her about the sprinklers in person? She was glad he'd told her. She had lunch at 12:15 and she usually cut through the grass to get there.

Rikki's phone rang loudly from inside her bag. Still rereading the note, Hadley flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Rikki, I'm glad you answered." Hadley's worried voice came through the phone.

"It's fine, Hadley." Rikki dropped down onto her bed. "I don't want to talk about it. Thanks for the note by the way. But you could have just told me."

Hadley paused. "What note?"

Rikki's brow furrowed. "The note you left in my science book... about the sprinkler system?"

"Rikki, I didn't leave you any note." Hadley spoke quickly. "But you should know..." He took a deep breath before continuing. "Dr. Denman just arrived in town. And she's coming to the high school. Tomorrow."

Rikki's gaze was locked, unblinking, on the floor in front of her. She clicked her phone shut without saying goodbye.

9. The Trick

Rikki's phone rang loudly in her hand. She stared at it blankly for several seconds before finally flipping it open.

"Rikki?" Hadley's anxious voice came through the other end. "I think we got cut off."

"Yeah, ah, sorry about that." Rikki rubbed her temples as she spoke. "You said Denman is coming to the high school tomorrow? Why?"

"She'll be making appearances at all of the local high schools over the next few weeks." Hadley said quickly. "I had an email from her when I got home. She's excited to catch up. She's mostly just talking to science classes but tomorrow she said she'd be stopping in my room to say hi."

"Ok then." Rikki didn't panick, she just processed. "I'll just skip your class tomorrow then. Can you excuse my absence?"

"Yeah, that's no problem." Hadley said distractedly. "Just be careful during the day, I'm not sure what time she'll be coming around. I'll text you as soon as I get more information from her." Hadley's voice took on a slightly stressed tone. "And Rikki, listen, I'd really like to talk to you about what happened today, I think I may have made a big mistake. I mean, after thinking things through-"

"That's ok, Hadley." Rikki said stiffly, cutting him off before he could finish. "We don't need to talk about anything. I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable." Rikki kept her voice even.

"No, that's not what I mean, I-"

"Goodnight, Hadley." Rikki shut her phone, trying to ignore the pang of guilt in her chest. Hadley hadn't done anything wrong. In fact, he'd been nothing but a good friend to her. This was just a crush she would need to get over. It was important to focus on a friendship with Hadley, nothing more. Still... Rikki rolled onto her stomach, deep in thought. She couldn't deny the fact that she was attracted to him. They had a spark that she'd never really felt before. But, Rikki reminded herself, if Hadley could 'deal with' his feelings so could she.

Rikki rolled onto her side, her eyes landing on the forgotten page of yellow paper still sitting on the desk. She swung her legs over the side of the bed as she reached for it. If Hadley hadn't written it... who had? Why would anyone warn her about something as obscure as a sprinkler system at the school?

Rikki examined the unfamiliar handwriting, rereading the words several times before refolding it and sliding it into her folder. Yes, it was strange, and more than a little worrying, but she couldn't do anything about it right now, could she?

Rikki wished she had someone to talk to about all this. She couldn't call Cleo or Bella, they would freak out if they knew that Hadley knew their secret. She could hardly call Zane, either. Even when they were still a couple he wouldn't want to hear about the Dr. Denman drama. Unknowingly, he'd played a part in her finding out the mermaids' secret, and he was still touchy about the subject.

Rikki sighed, closing her eyes tightly. It looked like this was going to be yet another sleepless night.

...And she was right.

The night crawled by at a snail's pace as Rikki stared up at her ceiling. It took forever for the sun to rise but eventually rays of light shone through Rikki's window.

She dressed quickly that morning, throwing on a hoodie and a worn out pair of jeans before heading down the steps. Mags had already left for work, so Rikki fixed her own breakfast and headed out the door. Her phone chimed as she parked at the high school.

'Dr. D won't be on campus til 10. I'll keep you updated. H.'

Rikki typed Hadley a quick thank you before heading inside. She walked in carefully, keeping her eyes peeled. Every turn around a

corner felt like a trap getting ready to spring. Rikki kept her hood pulled up, anxiously looking around for Dr. Denman's blonde head of hair. Sure, Hadley had said that she wouldn't arrive until ten, but that didn't ease Rikki's nerves any.

First period passed by way too slowly. Rikki couldn't help but jump every time the classroom door opened. The same was true of her second period. Rikki watched as the clock approached ten, then passed it. No word from Hadley, but Rikki would just have to assume Denman was on campus by now. The bell finally rang, signalling for the students to head to lunch hour. Rikki started for the cafeteria, but froze just outside the doors.

What if Dr. Denman was inside eating lunch? Or what if she walked in while Rikki was eating? There was nowhere to hide in that big open room, she would be a sitting duck.

Spinning on her heels, Rikki turned to walk back the way she came. Her phone beeped with a message from Hadley.

'Denman just arrived, we're headed to lunch. Then to my classroom. Be careful. H.'

A mixture of relief and anxiety washed over Rikki. She'd made a good choice, getting away from the lunchroom, but where was Denman right now? She could be anywhere.

Rikki had twisted her head around, checking behind her as she hurried, when she collided full force with an obnoxiously familiar face.

"Damn it, Rikki." Nick scowled as he picked himself up off the floor. "You trying out for the football team or something?"

"Sorry." Rikki muttered, stepping over him to continue down the hall.

"Wait! Rikki," Nick's voice sounded slightly strained as he called out to her. He seemed anxious, distracted as he caught his breath. "Listen, um, this is super embarrassing, but I sprained my ankle a few months ago."

"And?" Rikki waited impatiently for him to finish.

"And..." Nick stood, leaning heavily on the lockers as he winced in pain. "I think I've just reinjured it. You know, when you _tackled_ me." He glared at her while he took an unsuccessful test step. "Help me to the nurse. It's your fault I can hardly walk."

Rikki opened her mouth, ready to tell Nick exactly where he could shove his hurt ankle, but at that very moment an all-too familiar face turned the corner at the other end of the hall.

Rikki's pulse picked up as she registered Dr. Denman's smiling face walking down the hall towards them.

"Sure, c'mon." She threw Nick's arm over her shoulders, hiding her face behind it, at dragged him in the other direction.

"Really?" Thanks, Rikki." Nick said in a mocking tone as he did his

best to keep up.

"Hurry." Rikki hissed at him.

The nurse's office was just around the next corner, right next to the main office. Rikki slammed the door behind them as they made it inside, letting out a long sigh of relief.

Nick examined her, an odd look on his face. "What is wrong with you?" He frowned.

"I'm just... anxious for you to get that ankle looked at." Rikki said, casually shoving her hands in her pockets.

"Well, you can keep on being anxious then." Nick nodded toward the long line of students waiting in line to see the nurse, then shot her a sideways glance. "I'm just going to go home."

"What?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest. "You can't just leave school."

"I can if I'm eighteen." Nick smirked at her. "I can sign myself out anytime I want." He checked his watch, looking at Rikki out of the corner of his eye. "The, ah, city bus will be at the end of the road in ten minutes, I _guess_ I can make it that far."

"Actually, I'll drive you." Rikki spoke a little louder than she'd intended. "I mean," She lowered her voice. "I have free period next, then just Mr. Cruz's class. I'm sure he'll write me an excuse."

Nick shot a dark look at her, but didn't comment on her statement.

Rikki hurried to pull her car around while Nick signed out at the office. This was perfect. She would be off campus, safe from Dr. Denman. Having to spend time with Nick was a price she would just have to pay.

Nick limped pitifully out to the car, dropping into the passenger seat with an unhappy grunt. "You could have helped me outside." He grumbled.

"And you could be walking to catch the bus." Rikki smirked. "Now tell me how to get to your house."

Nick grudgingly gave her directions, then slumped back into the seat.

The drive was a little longer than Rikki expected it to be, ending in front of an absolutely breathtaking house right on its own private beach. Rikki could see the dock where she'd first met Nick, just behind the house. Wow. Sure, Nick had told her that the dock was his property, but she hadn't realized that it was attached to this amazing estate.

"You have an amazing home." She couldn't help but admit.

"It's just a house." Nick roughly pushed open his car door. "Help me inside."

Gritting her teeth, Rikki reluctantly walked around the car to open Nick's door. It's not like she had anything better to do, and she was actually pretty curious to see inside the massive house.

Disappointingly, the house was as clean inside as it was polished outside. As Rikki stepped inside, she marveled at the spotless tiles, the perfect furniture, and the perfectly clean decor. It was sterile, cold, almost too clean. There were no pictures on the wall, no family photos, nothing to set this house apart from a demo property. It was as if they were the first people to ever step inside.

"Does anyone actually live here?" Rikki asked sarcastically.

"Not really." Nick pushed past her and jogged up the steps.

"Hey..." Rikki crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought your ankle was sprained?"

"Oh yeah." Nick shrugged. "I guess it's all better." He smirked before continuing up the stairs.

"Listen, Nick," Rikki followed him angrily. "If you just wanted a ride home you should have asked. Faking an injury? That is the lamest thing I have ever..."

Rikki froze in the doorway of Nick's room. It was as if she'd stepped into a completely different house. A home. The walls were covered in photographs. Bookshelves lined the walls, overflowing with hundreds of books. The walls were painted a deep blue, with accents of white around the huge window overlooking the ocean.

Nick dropped into a wooden chair behind an overflowing desk. "Yeah, lame." He said glumly. "Feel free to show yourself out."

Rikki ignored him, walking inside slowly as she looked at the pictures tacked onto the wall. Virtually every single one had the same blonde girl smiling at the camera. Some were only her, but several of them were of the blonde girl and Nick. Rikki stopped to look at one photograph in particular. The girl was struggling to pick Nick up on her back, and he was laughing into the camera. The smile looked good on him, like he was a completely different person from the sullen teen Rikki knew from school.

"Who is she?" Rikki nodded toward the wall of photographs.

Nick barely glanced at them before turning back to the notebook he was writing in. "Kaitlyn." He said, disinterested.

"Ah." Rikki walked further along the wall. "Your... girlfriend?"

"No." Nick didn't seem interested in volunteering any further information.

"Fine." Rikki zipped up her hoodie, ready to leave. "Sorry for trying to get to know you."

She paused in the doorway as a loud crack of thunder shook the house. "No... not now..." She muttered as raindrops began pattering on the

roof. She wanted to get out of here, but how could she? And how would she convince Nick to let her hang around?"

"She's my sister." Nick's voice came from behind her.

Rikki turned back to face him, surprised that he was continuing their conversation. "I didn't know you have a sister." She said, slowly walking back into the room. "Is she older or younger?"

"My twin." Nick said grimly, looking down at the floor. He didn't seem to particularly want to talk about her, but he did anyway.

"You have a twin?" Rikki couldn't believe it. "I've never seen her, does she go to our school?"

"No." Nick said distractedly as he leaned forward to check outside. "I hate the rain."

"Me too." Rikki laughed nervously, hoping it would stop soon. She reached for a picture that was barely tacked to the wall, getting ready to fall. "So why haven't I met her? I mean, she looks a lot more fun than you are, Nick."

"She was." Nick stood abruptly, snatching the photo out of Rikki's hand. "Don't touch anything."

Rikki was still processing what he had said. "Was?" She repeated.

Nick sank into his desk chair, looking at the picture of him and Kaitlyn. "She died." His voice was emotionless as he spoke. "She died six months ago."

"Oh Nick..." Rikki gently placed a hand on his shoulder, stunned at his words. "I am so sorry."

"Yeah, well." Nick shrugged away from her touch. "These things happen."

As Rikki looked at him she was overcome with the desire to hug him. He may be playing the cold, emotionless guy, but he didn't have her fooled. She could see the pain just beneath his expression. Rikki took a step backward, giving him the space he seemed to want.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She asked quietly.

"No." Nick cleared his throat as he shut the picture in his book. "Look, if you want to go downstairs and watch tv or something until it stops raining feel free. I'm sure you don't want to get your shoes wet."

Rikki frowned at the back of his head. This was too easy, why would Nick care if her shoes got wet? It was the flimsiest excuse for staying out of the rain, and it had been his suggestion, not hers. A funny feeling crept into the back of her mind but she pushed it out. So what if Nick cared about her shoes? He'd given her a reason to wait out the storm and she was going to take it.

"I think I'll do that." She said stiffly before heading back down the stairs.

Rikki dropped down onto the pristine leather couch, flicking on the television but not watching it. Something was up, she could feel it. First, Nick almost catches her on the dock. Then, in class, he stopped Brad from flinging water around the room. Rikki hadn't thought much of it at the time, Brad was obnoxious for a million reasons, but what if Nick had stopped him to protect her? And then there was what had just happened. Nick had seemed perfectly willing to let her march out of the house until it had started raining, then he had come up with some lame reason to let her stay. And then there was the mysterious note...

No... he couldn't know. He hadn't said a word about it, and there was no way he could know what she was without mentioning it.

Rikki still felt uneasy.

The front door unlocked as a very pretty brunette lady walked inside.

"Oh. Hello?" She said curiously when she saw Rikki sitting on the couch.

"Hi." Rikki jumped to her feet. "I'm a friend of Nick's, I'm Rikki."

"A friend of Nick's?" The woman raised her eyebrows. "That's the first time I've heard those words in months. Where is he?"

"Hey mom, you're home early." Nick walked sullenly down the steps.

"My son has no manners." She shook her head. "I'm Gwen, nice to meet you Rikki."

"I think you work with my Aunt, actually." Rikki spoke up. "Mags Stillwell?"

"You're right, what a small world it is." Gwen smiled.

Up close, Rikki could see that Gwen's face was wrinkled, making her look much older than she actually was. "Can I help with those?" She walked towards the groceries Gwen was carrying.

"No, I got it." Nick shoved past her to grab the plastic bags from his mother.

"What's this? You're helping?" Gwen laughed as she handed them over. "I think Rikki's going to need to stick around, she's obviously a good influence on you."

"Hardly." Nick grunted as he dropped the bags onto the counter.

Rikki noticed that two of the bags held fresh produce, with water droplets still falling from the leaves. She narrowed her eyes at Nick, but he avoided her gaze.

"Here Rikki, would you mind tossing this in the side closet?" Gwen lightly tossed her soaking wet umbrella in Rikki's

direction.

Instinctively, Rikki ducked out of the way, but she needn't have moved at all. Nick lunged, catching the wet umbrella before it could come near her. He froze, inches away from Rikki as she stared at him with wide eyes.

Rikki felt like she couldn't breathe as his eyes burned into hers. "You do know." She whispered.

10. Kaitlyn

You could have heard a pin drop as Rikki and Nick looked at each other, each frozen in place.

"Are you two ok over there?" Gwen broke the silence as she put groceries into the refrigerator.

"Uh, yeah mom." Nick shook himself, avoiding Rikki's eyes as he threw the umbrella into the closet by the door. "We have some homework to do."

Nick grabbed Rikki's hand and practically dragged her up to his room, shutting the door tightly behind him. He turned to face her, breathing hard.

"You need to explain yourself now." Rikki said, her voice hot with anger.

Nick paced, running his hands through his hair as he composed his thoughts. "Ok, I know what you are." He said with a shrug, as if he was merely commenting on the weather or something.

Rikki's heart sank as her suspicions were confirmed. "You... know?" She walked towards him slowly, keeping her voice down.

"I know you're a mermaid, alright?" Nick half whispered, half spoke as he dropped onto his bed in frustration.

"How long have you known?" Rikki asked stiffly, still trying to process things.

"Since I saw you out on my dock." Nick admitted. "I mean, it was pretty hard to miss you, you've got to start being more careful where you change."

Rikki opened and closed her mouth, at a loss for what to say next. He was so casual about all of this, why wasn't he freaking out or asking questions?

Nick watched her shocked expression, then rolled his eyes at her. "You don't have to freak out, I'm not going to say anything." He stood and walked to his desk, pulling open his math book.

"You left me the note about the sprinkler system." Rikki said accusingly.

"What, are you mad about that?" Nick turned in his chair to frown at her. "Come on, Rikki, you would have walked right through that wet

grass on your class change. I was just giving you a heads up." He turned back to his book.

Rikki grabbed the book away from him, tossing it onto the bed. "Look." She said seriously. "You need to explain why you're handling this like it's no big deal." She paused. "Are you just waiting for the right opportunity to expose me?"

Nick snorted. "Of course not. Rikki, I could care less that you're a mermaid, seriously. In fact, I wish I didn't know." The old bitterness returned to his voice.

Rikki sank onto the edge of his bed, her head too full of thoughts to process them. Nick turned his chair around to face her, leaning forward on his elbows.

"I'm not the only one who knows, either." He said bluntly. "I know you told Mr. Cruz."

"No, I didn't." Rikki retorted. "He caught me." She admitted after a second.

Nick raised his eyebrows, clearly waiting for her to continue.

Rikki sighed. "I was helping him install the aquarium after class, I spilled water and had to run. He followed me." She finished simply.

"Aquarium, huh?" Nick nodded, his voice guarded. "Not the sharpest tool in the box, are you?"

"There wasn't any water in it." Rikki said defensively.

"Well you two seem quite pleased with each other." Nick said darkly, his eyes smug.

"Don't change the subject." Rikki crossed her arms. "Why didn't you tell me that you knew?"

Nick shrugged. "I didn't see any reason to." He shot her a look, almost daring her to continue the conversation. "Are we done now?"

Rikki wasn't backing down now. "What aren't you telling me? I know there's more to it than this. No one can find out about mermaid and be so casual about it."

The harsh expression seemed to melt off of Nick's face as his eyes unwillingly flickered over the photographs hanging on the wall. He sighed as he let his head drop forward, cradling it in his hands.

Rikki frowned, tilting her head to one side as she looked at him. "Talk to me, Nick." She said carefully.

"Kaitlyn was one too." He admitted quietly, still looking at the floor. "A mermaid like you."

Whatever she was expecting him to say, it wasn't that. Rikki stared at him, stunned. "How?" She managed eventually.

"We took a family trip to Ireland about four years ago." Nick spoke after several seconds of silence. "There was this... cavern."

"Just like Bella." Rikki whispered to herself.

"We used to fight like cats and dogs." Nick no longer seemed to be speaking to Rikki, it was as if he were speaking to himself, reliving a memory. "And then on our vacation she went to explore the grounds." He laughed bitterly. "She was always doing things like that, going off on her own. The next day, my parents made me go with her to the shore, they didn't want her out alone in a strange country. They were pretty upset she snuck out the night before, I guess. Anyway, she walked out into the ocean and... well, you know what happened next."

"What did you do?" Rikki was mesmerized by his story.

"I helped pull her out." Nick met her eyes. "She was freaking out pretty good, but I calmed her down and dried her off. At least there was no one out on the beach to see her. After that we were basically inseparable. She was my best friend."

"Did your parents know?" Rikki leaned forward.

"I was the only one who ever knew." Nick shook his head. "It was hard work, but we kept the secret. It was really hard on Kaitlyn, She could never get too close to people, she was terrified someone would find out what she was. I helped her, it was like a full time job just making sure she was safe. And then she met her." Nick's face darkened, sending a shiver up Rikki's spine.

"Her?" Rikki asked curiously. "Her who?"

"This scientist named Dr. Denman." Nick spat out, a look of pure hatred on his face.

Suddenly, Rikki had no breath left. "Dr. Denman?" She could barely say the name.

"Dr. Denman knew about mermaids." Nick once again sounded like he was talking to himself. "She was at the beach one day when we were out on the boat. She had to have been using binoculars on us or something." He said angrily. "I don't know how exactly she found out, but she did. She knew Kaitlyn's secret. At first, Kaitlyn wanted to run away, but Denman convinced her to let her run a few tests."

Rikki swallowed hard, debating on whether or not to tell Nick about her own experience with Dr. Denman. She decided to wait, she feared Nick would stop talking if she interrupted him now. This was by far the longest conversation they'd ever had. It felt completely surreal, sitting in Nick's bedroom talking about mermaids.

"A few tests turned into a full time experiment. Denman convinced Kaitlyn to start staying at the lab. She told her she may know a way to reverse the process, to turn her human again. She was lying." Nick pulled the picture from between the pages of his book, looking at it as he spoke. "She locked Kaitlyn in a room. I didn't know where she was, our parents were worried. Kaitlyn managed to escape while they were taking her to the experimentation lab. She ran outside as fast

as she could, ran right out into the street." He stopped talking, closing his eyes at the painful memory.

"You don't have to keep talking if you don't want to." Rikki stood, walking to stand next to him. She sank onto her heels, looking up at him with concern.

Nick ignored her. "I was on the other side of the street. I had come to confront Denman, to demand she tell me where Kaitlyn had gone. She was running to me when the car hit her." One tear fell onto the floor as he spoke. He roughly brushed it away as he stood, pacing slowly to the window. "I'm not going to tell anyone, you don't have anything to worry about." He turned to look at her, a purposely blank expression on his face. "I honestly don't care that you're a mermaid."

"Thank you." Rikki said uncertainly, unsure if he was being kind or not. "And thank you for covering for me."

"I can't believe you actually helped me to the nurse." Nick dropped next to her onto the bed. "I was just trying to get you out of there. She was there today, at the school. I couldn't believe it when I saw her, it took every ounce of strength to just walk away. I had-"

"It was Dr. Denman." Rikki said gently, keeping her eyes lowered. Nick had been honest with her, it was time for her to do the same for him. "That's who was at the school today, isn't it?"

Nick's eyes were trained firmly on her, his sharp gaze making Rikki feel self conscious. "You know Denman." He spoke the words as a statement instead of a question.

"She knew about me too." Rikki sighed, then told him all about her own experiences with Dr. Linda Denman. She looked up at him after she finished, waiting to see his reaction.

"So she thinks you're just an ordinary human being now?" Nick asked incredulously.

"Yeah." Rikki nodded. "But I'm not trying to bump into her so she can check."

"I hate her." Nick spoke without a hint of a smile on his face. "I can't believe she's in town." He laughed humorlessly. "I was on my way to the lunchroom to find you. I'd just seen her walking down the opposite hall. I had no idea how I was going to get you out of there, but then you barreled right into me. You were running away from her too." He chuckled. "I knew it was too easy."

"I thought the same thing. It was just too easy." Rikki smiled slightly. "Thank you."

"It's nice to have someone to talk to about all this." The Nick that looked at Rikki was nothing like the rude, cocky boy she'd known from school. All of the bitterness seemed to have faded from his face, it was like he was someone else, someone Rikki wanted to be friends with.

"I agree." She said timidly.

Nick looked down at his hands. "You know, you and Kaitlyn would have

really hit it off."

"I believe you." Rikki nodded.

A knock at the bedroom door startled both of them.

"Nick?" Gwen cautiously poked her head through the doorway, her eyes immediately noting how closely Rikki and Nick were sitting on the bed. "Will you do me a huge favor and run outside and get the case files from my trunk? I need them all in my office and my back is just killing me."

"Yeah, sure." Nick trudged out of the room, shooting a long look at Rikki as he walked.

"Uh, I'm sorry the door was closed, Ms. Donovan." Rikki stood awkwardly. "But we weren't doing anything, I swear."

"You can call me Gwen, Rikki." The older woman said with a smile. "And, to be perfectly honest, a little human contact would do that boy some good. He's been so sad and secluded since..." Her smile faded. "Well, it's just good to see him with a friend. Especially one as pretty as you."

"They're on your desk, Mom." Rikki heard Nick shout from downstairs.

"I really should be going." Rikki glanced out the window. It must have stopped raining a while ago, the sun was shining brightly.

"So soon?" Gwen looked disappointed. "Can you stay for dinner?"

"Mags will wonder where I've gotten to." Rikki apologised. "But it was so nice to meet you."

Nick met her at the bottom of the stairs, an unreadable expression on his face. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, I want to check in on Denman, see if she'll be hanging around tomorrow." Rikki kept her voice lowered in case Gwen was near by.

Nick nodded. "I'll be keeping a low profile until she's gone. She only met me a couple times, but I don't want her to recognise me." The grimness returned to his face.

"So... I'll see you tomorrow?" Rikki didn't quite know what to say. They'd just shared such an intimate conversation, it felt so awkward to just say goodbye and leave.

"Hey." Nick suddenly reached for a pen and paper off the table. "Take this, it's my phone number." He wrote the numbers down quickly before handing it to Rikki. "I'm not trying to hit on you or anything, don't worry." He said bluntly. "But four eyes are better than two. If you see Denman or hear anything helpful let me know."

Rikki nodded, quickly tapping the number into her phone. She pressed Send.

Nick's phone lit up as her call came through.

"There. Now you have mine too." Rikki tucked her phone into her back pocket.

"I'll let you know if I hear anything." Nick held the front door open for her. "And hey... thanks for the talk."

"Anytime." Rikki smiled warmly at him, feeling like she'd just met a new person.

Nick stepped back so that Rikki could move past him onto the front step. "Oh, Rikki, before you go..." He stopped her.

"Yes?" Rikki turned to him expectantly, certain that he would pull her close, after all that talking surely he wanted at least a hug before she left."

Nick ducked quickly into the hall. "Here." He unceremoniously dropped a bag of flour into her arms. "Your turn, mommy. James loves Sesame Street. Be sure to change him in three hours."

And with that, the front door swung closed with a thunk.

Rikki turned, confused as she made her way to the car, pausing to toss James into the trunk. What a weird day this had been. She had a lot to think about.

11. Wait, what?

Rikki's phone rang as she drove, bringing her out of her thoughts.

"Hey Hadley." She said wearily, onto the street she lived on.

"Hey Rikki, sorry for calling, I just wanted to talk to you about something." Hadley's voice sounded awkward, a tad nervous over the phone.

"No, actually, I need to talk to you." Rikki cut in, suddenly revived. She needed to tell Hadley what had happened today, it was only fair. "Are you at home?"

"Um, I'm on my way." Hadley said, unsure. "I'll be there in about ten minutes."

"Excellent." Rikki turned the wheel, pointing it towards Hadley's street. "I've got a lot to tell you about."

The drive only took about fifteen minutes. Hadley was leaning against his car, waiting for her as she pulled into the driveway. He quickly walked around to the driver's side of her car, pulling the door open for her.

"You sounded anxious over the phone." He waited for her to climb out. "Did something happen? Did you see Denman?"

"Yes and yes, but let's go inside." Rikki exhaled. "I'll tell you all about it."

It only took a few minutes for the pair to get situated on the couch inside Hadley's living room.

"Are you hungry? Do you want anything?" Hadley asked as they sat down.

"No, I'm fine." Rikki said quickly, ready to get down to business. "Listen, Nick knows about me."

Hadley's face was blank as he stared at her. "What?" He raised his eyebrows in confusion.

"Nick Donovan, from your class. The new guy." Rikki spoke slowly. "He knows what I am. That I'm a mermaid."

"He does?" Hadley stood, running his hands through his hair before turning to Rikki. "I didn't tell him, I swear, Rikki. I don't know how he found out but I promise it wasn't from me."

"I know, I know." Rikki gently pulled on Hadley's elbow, gesturing for him to sit back down. "He knows because..." She found herself pausing, unable to speak the words.

"How?" Hadley pushed. "How does he know?"

Rikki breathed deep, weighing her thoughts in her head. She had been prepared to tell Hadley the whole story, all about Nick and his sister and Denman and all of it, but was it really her story to tell? Nick hadn't really wanted Rikki to know about Kaitlyn, would he be thrilled to know she'd blabbed the whole thing to their teacher? She instantly made her decision.

"He... saw me, actually." She rolled her eyes. "I was stupid, I went for a swim this afternoon after I'd left school and he saw me climbing out of the water onto a dock. His dock." She added, certain a little truth wouldn't hurt. "So... he knows now."

"Someone else knows." Hadley seemed panicked, lost in his own little world. He looked at Rikki with wide eyes. "What will you do? Do you need to transfer schools? Is he going to tell?"

"No, no, don't worry." Rikki said easily. "I've had a talk with him, he isn't going to say anything to anyone. He's agreed to keep the secret."

"Are you sure?" Hadley frowned. "I mean, you're positive you can trust him?"

"Yes, I am." Rikki nodded, hoping to be able to convince Hadley without having to tell him too much more. "I need you to trust me, ok? Nick won't say anything. I just thought you deserved to know."

"Ok." Hadley stared at the floor as he processed her words. "I trust you."

"Good." Rikki exhaled, relieved, before jumping to her feet. "Don't say anything, well, of course don't say anything. I should be getting home."

"Now?" Hadley caught her hand before she could move away. "I thought maybe you could stay for dinner."

"I don't think that would be appropriate." Rikki said levelly, not meeting his eyes. "You are my teacher, after all." She raised an eyebrow at Hadley, almost daring him to say a word otherwise.

"You're right." Hadley said quietly, immediately dropping Rikki's hand. "I just thought you might want to hang out... as friends, of course."

"I really do appreciate the offer." Rikki said honestly. "But I have a heap of homework to get done, I should really just get home." She started for the front door. "Oh," She paused. "Will Denman be on campus tomorrow?"

"No, I don't think so." Hadley followed her. "We caught up with each other today, she said she had a ton of testing on the books for tomorrow."

"Good deal." Rikki smiled. "Then I suppose I'll see you in class?"

"Right." Hadley pulled the front door open with obvious reluctance. "I'll see you in class."

"Thanks, Hadley." Rikki grinned at him before heading outside to her car. She wasn't blind, she knew what Hadley wanted to talk about. But she wasn't having it. It had been embarrassing enough getting rejected, she wasn't going to expose herself to any more humiliation.

The drive home was filled with thoughts and questions she could hardly contain, but she managed to walk in the front door with a calm smile on her face. After a quick dinner with Mags (who was just dying to go jean shopping with Rikki that weekend) she was finally up in her room, alone.

Rikki sat quietly in her room, reviewing what had happened that day. It seemed almost impossible. She'd expected to have already had the most amazing thing in her life to have occurred already, but it seemed fate just wanted to keep her guessing.

* * *

><p>The next morning came quickly, finding Rikki surprisingly well-rested. She took a moment just to relax in bed, mentally reviewing the events of the previous day before standing and stretching.<p>

Rikki didn't quite know what to expect when she walked into school that morning. She cast a hopeful look around the quad for Nick, but couldn't see him. She'd wanted to speak with him before classes started, but it didn't seem like that was a possibility. She pulled her phone from her pocket and typed a quick message.

'Nick, Just wanted to say thanks again for saving me yesterday. See you in class? No Denman today. -R.'

The bell rang, causing Rikki to hurry to her first class. She checked her phone several times during the day, but never received a reply from Nick.

'Are you ok?'

She paused before sending the message. She didn't want to seem overbearing, but what if Denman had gotten ahold of him? What if she had him captive, asking him questions about how Kaitlyn had become a mermaid? Rikki pushed 'send,' hoping to hear back from Nick soon.

Rikki still hadn't received a reply when she walked into her last class of the day, Hadley's. She cast a worried eye around the room, but didn't see Nick at his usual spot.

"Hey, guys." Hadley walked in, dropping a stack of papers onto his desk as he looked out at all of them.

"Sorry I'm late." Nick muttered as he pushed through the classroom door. He slunk into the room and dropped into the seat behind his desk, not bothering to acknowledge Rikki as he walked past her.

"Well, now that we're all here..." Hadley shot a pointed look at Nick before continuing. "Today we are writing journal entries. Where do you see yourselves in five years? Please be detailed. You have twenty minutes to write, then you'll be working with partners editing each other's papers. We'll stick with the usual partners..." His voice trailed away as his eyes flickered from Rikki to Nick. "Actually, on second thought, we'll be shaking things up. You are each partnered with the name next to yours on the class roster."

Rikki moved to sit next to Billy Carson, trying to catch Nick's eye as she walked. He didn't look up, didn't even act like he knew who Rikki was.

"Hey." Rikki said, standing at the edge of Nick's desk to catch his attention. "Did you get my texts?"

"Yeah." Nick spoke with disinterest, his eyes never leaving the page of paper in front of him. "Sorry, too busy to answer, I guess."

Rikki frowned as she sat down, thrown off by Nick's rudeness. Her phone blipped in her pocket.

'Really am sorry, not good at this. -N.'

Feeling slightly better, Rikki tucked the silver phone back into her jeans, watching as Nick did the same.

The bell rang, causing almost every student to jump to their feet and run for the door. Rikki followed suit, though she moved more slowly than the herd. Nick seemed the same, taking his time to pack his bag. Eventually, it was only the three of them, Rikki, Nick, and Hadley, in the room.

"So, Rikki..." Hadley walked carefully to Rikki's desk, keeping one

eye on Nick. He spoke to her quietly. "Can we grab a bite? Or I thought you might want to go to the ocean? I know a really private entryway..." His voice lowered even further.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry." Rikki wanted to talk to Nick, but he packed up and took off through the door without a second glance back at her.

"But would you like a swim?" Hadley pushed.

Rikki sighed, disappointed that she hadn't caught Nick before he'd left. "I don't know, Hadley, I might just get home."

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Nick came rushing back into the classroom. He had a panicked look on his face as he turned to Rikki and Hadley.

"She's here." He panted. "Denman, headed this direction." His eyes were wide, panicked as he focused in on Rikki.

"Here, hurry." Hadley ran to his supply closet, pulling the metal doors open. "There's room, just inside." He gestured.

Rikki didn't waste any time, dashing around desks and leaping into the metal cupboard. She jumped in surprise as Nick leapt inside as well, finding herself face to face with him, barely an inch separating their faces.

The silence inside the metal cabinet was almost deafening as Rikki and Nick looked at each other. The darkness was encompassing as they found their bearings. They both jumped as their noses accidentally grazed one another's in the blackness, though they tried as hard as they could to keep quiet.

Rikki found herself breathing hard, completely aware of her proximity to Nick.

"Sh." Nick hissed at her. "If Denman comes in here she'll hear you huffing and puffing over there."

"Why did you even jump in here with me?" Rikki whispered back. "You could have just gotten out of here."

"And bump into her in the hallway?" Nick spoke quietly back. "I don't want that witch to know I'm anywhere near here. Of course I was going to hide."

Several seconds of silence passed, interrupted only by the sound of Rikki's and Nick's breathing in the cramped metal cabinet.

"Hadley!"

Rikki and Nick both froze as they heard the familiar voice walk into the classroom.

"I just wanted to say what fun I had catching up yesterday, I thought you might want to catch a movie?" Denman's voice echoed throughout the room.

"Linda, hi!" Hadley's voice sounded overly enthusiastic. "I didn't know you were coming by today?"

"I thought I'd surprise you."

Rikki could hear the voice drawing nearer. She held her breath tightly, hearing Nick do the same. Almost robotically, her arms wrapped around Nick's waist, pulling him to her.

"Well this is quite the surprise." Hadley sounded warmer than ever. "How about I take you to that movie?"

"That sounds perfect." Denman sounded surprised at Hadley's eager acceptance. "Are you ready now?"

"Ah..." Rikki could hear Hadley making a quick sweep over the room. "I sure am."

The couple walked out of the classroom a second later. Rikki and Nick stayed in the closet, frozen, for several seconds before casually peeking out.

"They're gone." Nick announced as he pushed away from Rikki and fell out onto the floor.

"Thank goodness." Rikki smoothed her top as she stepped out after him. "I'm glad Hadley got her out of here."

"Yeah, whatever." Nick threw his backpack back onto his shoulders. "Later."

"Wait." Rikki called after him, catching him before he could get through the door.

"What?" Nick turned back to her, a look of extreme inconvenience on his face.

Rikki found herself take aback, surprised at his hostility. "I... just thought you might want to hang out?"

"With you?" Nick asked incredulously. "Why?"

Rikki crossed her arms, trying not to get angry. "Well, after yesterday I just though we had a lot in common." She said through gritted teeth.

"In common?" Nick's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Rikki, we have nothing in common." He turned to exit through the classroom door.

"Nick, wait!" Rikki called, louder than she'd meant to. She immediately quieted her tone. "But what about yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" Nick stepped back into the room, a hard look on his face. He spoke quietly. "You're a mermaid, just like my sister, I've spent the last week looking out for you, just like I used to do for my sister. Now I'm dodging Denman, just like my sister should have." He paused, clenching his jaw before speaking. "And you want to know why I don't want to spend time with you?" He stood with his feet wide

apart, a bold look on his face. "What makes you think I want to be reminded of my sister, or the demented scientist who drove her to her death?"

Rikki's mouth dropped open, unable to form a response.

"Sounds like you've figured it out." Nick slung his pack over his shoulder and marched out of the room, not bothering to even shoot Rikki a sideways look as he passed her.

Rikki felt like her heart must be pounding against her chest as she watched him leave. She'd felt such a connection to him, such a closeness. She couldn't believe Nick didn't return her feelings. Her phone blipped loudly from the desk where it rested.

'Taking Denman to a two hour movie, but wishing I was with you. Meet up later?'

The text was from Hadley. Rikki read it through twice, unsure of how to respond. In spite of Nick's rudeness, she found herself wanting to be near him.

'Yeah, maybe.' She sent eventually, not wanting to continue stalling.

'Great, I'll call you.' Hadley's next text read.

Trying not to be too disappointed, Rikki dropped into her car and headed home. So what? Nick wasn't interested in her. What was the big deal?

Rikki tried, but she couldn't shake the feeling of total rejection. She shook herself, hard. Who cared about Nick Donovan anyway?

* * *

><p>It was way later that evening when the lights in Hadley's classroom flickered back on.<p>

"I am so sorry about this," Linda Denman apologised as she burst into the room. "I could have sworn I set my phone down in here."

"I don't see it?" Hadley flipped through the papers on his desk, looking for Denman's phone. "Are you sure you brought it in?"

"Positive." Linda nodded, trying not to laugh as she searched.

Hadley wandered toward the back of the room as he dialed Denman's number. "Ok, listen for it." He announce as it started ringing in his ear.

A few second of silence passed. Denman wandered near Hadley's desk, lifting a stack of papers to check underneath for her cellular.

Bleep! Her phone lit up brilliantly from the table. "We found it!" Hadley called.

"Yeah... we found it." Denman murmured, her eyes locked on the list of students on the desk in front of her.

'Rikki Chadwick... Nick Donovan...' She muttered, not loud enough for Hadley to hear. She knew both of those names, were they both in this class? They certainly weren't yesterday, when she'd been there. No, this was impossible, the odds...

"Hadley..." She called. "I'd like to do some special research with your class..."

12. The Plan, Kind of

Rikki went up to her room as soon as she got home. She took her time changing out of her school clothes into her warm jammies, then dropped onto her bed. It was early, but she didn't want to move. She just need to think, alone.

Rikki let out a long sigh as she mentally recapped all that had happened in the short time she'd been in Florida. Two people knew her secret, Denman was in town, she'd broken up with Zane... Her head hurt as she thought about it all.

Rikki rolled onto her side, furrowing her brow. She'd been so convinced she'd had feelings for Hadley. He was so sweet, so understanding. He'd rejected her, sure, but now it seemed like he was ready to start something.

And then there was Nick. Rikki frowned. She'd never been able to stand him. He was rude, cocky, and downright obnoxious sometimes. Still, she'd felt a connection with him in his bedroom when he was talking about Kaitlyn. He was still totally closed off though, and he certainly had no interest in Rikki.

Fine, Rikki decided firmly. It was better not to get attached to anyone anyway. She'd be going back to Australia in a few months, no point in getting involved with an American. Especially one who wasn't interested in her.

Rikki managed to fall asleep, despite the early hour. She slept surprisingly well, a welcome change from the sleepless night that had become the norm since she arrived in this country.

Her phone rang loudly from her back pocket, waking her from her deep sleep. Rikki fished it out reluctantly, already sure of who it was. Rikki pushed the 'ignore' button, sending Hadley's call straight through to voicemail. She felt guilty, but she didn't really want to go back out tonight. The phone rang again a few minutes later, but Rikki ignored that call too. Feeling bad, she sent Hadley a quick text.

'Not feeling great, just going to stay in tonight. -R.'

His response came through a moment later.

'Thanks for letting me know, was worried. Slight Denman developement, talk tomorrow. Feel better. H.'

Rikki sat up as she read the text message. Slight Denman

development? What did that mean? Was it a good development or a bad one? She knew she'd never be able to rest if she was wondering about Denman all night. Reluctantly, Rikki dialed Hadley's number.

"Hello?" He answered after a few rings.

"Hey, sorry I couldn't wait til morning to call." Rikki spoke quietly, checking the time. It was only ten o'clock, but it felt much later. "What do you mean, there's been a Denman development?"

"She wants to do special research with my class." Hadley spoke quickly. "With your class, she said last period was the only time she had available."

"Whoa whoa whoa, what do you mean, special research?" Rikki didn't have a good feeling about this.

"She used to do it all the time," Hadley sighed. "She uses ordinary high school classes to test the level of understanding as set forth in her research-"

"English, Hadley." Rikki said tiredly.

"Ok, she likes to have groups of younger people do readings, then test them on what they understood." Hadley also sounded worn out as he spoke. "She also likes to use the groups to do tests of her research. She could do the tests herself, but it's easier to have a class of twenty do them. Then, she has twenty sets of results to compare instead of her own."

"Ok, I'm following." Rikki nodded. "And she wants to use us."

"Yes. And Rikki," Hadley paused. "We're in trouble here. She's an experimental biologist. That means water, her testing will definitely be water related."

"So just tell her no." Rikki said simply. "Tell her you're not interested, you have your own curriculum to stick to."

"I can't." Hadley sounded more than a little exasperated. "Rikki, most teachers would die for a chance for their class to work with a scientist of Denman's caliber. If I turn her down she'll want to know why, and I don't have a good enough answer for that question."

"Ok then." Rikki processed the situation. "I won't come to your class. I'll warn Nick, we'll lay low just like we did yesterday."

"That's the second bad thing." Hadley swallowed loudly. "Listen, I was trying to talk her out of it, out of using my class, and she was shooting down everything I threw at her. I told her to use the honors science class, she said she wanted to use mine. I told her there were plenty of college kids who would love to work with her, she said she preferred high schoolers. I tried, ok?"

"Ok..." Rikki waited for the rest of his 'second bad thing.'

"She asked for a copy of my class roster so that she could prepare data based on all of your ages and how many boys and girls, that sort

of thing. I wouldn't give it to her, because your name was on it."

"And Nick's too." Rikki added.

"Yeah, him too." Hadley took a deep breath. "By the time I'd gotten home I had an email from Principal Cooper. Denman had already contacted him, and he's _thrilled._ He sent her my complete roster, along with each student's class schedule in case she needed to reach one of you at another point during the day." Hadley continued bitterly. "He also told her we'd cooperate in any way possible. She has your info, Rikki."

Rikki found herself unable to speak. "She... knows I'm here."

"She knows a Rikki Chadwick is here." Hadley confirmed. "It doesn't say anywhere on your roster or schedule that you're Australian or a transfer, but once she sees you she's sure to recognise you. Rikki, you may be able to skip my class and get away with it, but you can't just stay out of school completely. That'll just raise more attention."

"So what do we do?" Rikki rubbed her forehead, trying to make herself think.

"I don't know." Hadley said helplessly. "I have no idea how to get out of this. Denman was so damn _persistent."_

"When is this special research starting?" Rikki stood, pacing the bedroom.

"I don't know, but I assume tomorrow." Hadley sighed as he dropped into a chair. "Rikki, I don't know what to do."

"Ok." Rikki spoke calmly. "I'll give it some thought, we'll figure something out. Thanks for the heads up."

"I'm sorry this has turned into a mess." Hadley said honestly.

"It's not your fault." Rikki sat at her desk, her brain scrambling for an answer. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Til tomorrow, then." Hadley hung up the phone.

Rikki set her phone on the desk, debating on whether or not to call Nick. He ought to know what was going on, she couldn't let him just walk into class without knowing anything. Making up her mind, Rikki opened her phone and sent him a text similar to the one she'd received from Hadley.

'Slight Denman developement. Be careful tomorrow. -R.'

It was vague, but it was better than nothing. Setting her phone on her bedside table, Rikki curled up under the covers. She tried to sleep, but it was impossible to relax.

Rikki walked into school the next day feeling as if she were being led to the gallows.

'All clear?'

She sent the text to Hadley, waiting nervously before venturing into the hallway.

'So far. Meet me downstairs in the B gym.'

Rikki quickly took the little used staircase down to the tiny practice gym. The school had built a fancy new training gym earlier that year, so the place was practically deserted. She quickly found Hadley, who was waiting for her at the end of the hall.

"I asked Linda if she'd be coming by today, she said she'd let me know. I haven't heard from her yet." Hadley said breathlessly. "I don't know if she's coming to class today or not."

"Ok." Rikki felt oddly calm, but terrified at the same time.

"So I had an idea." Hadley said all in a rush. "What if we pay some student to pretend to be you for a couple days? We could tell her it's a joke or something-"

"That would never work." Rikki shook her head. "I mean, it's not a stupid idea, but think about it. All Denman has to do is talk to any one of my other teachers. They'll be more than happy to tell her that the imposter isn't me. And I'm pretty sure they wouldn't mind telling her about me being here on exchange from Australia too. All Denman has to do is ask questions, plenty of people will be happy to answer them."

"I didn't think of that." Hadley deflated. "But you're right."

"I've been thinking about this all night." Rikki said slowly, choosing each word carefully. "The bottom line is that Denman thinks I'm a normal girl. She saw me go into the water and come out human."

"Right." Hadley nodded.

"So, as long as I'm insanely careful, I may be able to fake my way through this." Rikki tried to sound confident as she spoke.

"You really think so?" Hadley couldn't hide the skepticism he obviously felt.

"I don't think I have any other choice." Rikki raised her shoulders.

"Did you tell Nick about what's going on?" Hadley looked down at his shoes uncomfortably.

"I texted him that something was up." Rikki checked her phone. "He never answered me."

"Figures." Hadley's tone was short.

"What do you have against him?" Rikki frowned. "He hasn't done anything to you."

"No, he hasn't, there's just something about him I don't trust." Hadley said angrily. "I mean, he should be here right now, helping to

come up with a way to keep you safe."

"No, he definitely shouldn't." Rikki spoke forcefully. Lowering her tone, she leaned in to Hadley. "Listen to me. I appreciate your help, really I do, but I don't need anyone to protect me or take responsibility for me. It isn't yours or Nick's job to protect me, ok? It's up to me. No one else."

"Ok, sorry." Hadley stepped back, his hands raised.

The bell rang, causing both of them to jump.

"I'll text you if I hear from her." Hadley said tersely before turning to walk back through the hall.

Rikki sighed as she watched him go. Life was a lot simpler back in Australia.

The day passed by agonizingly slowly. Rikki was on edge, jumping every time the classroom door opened. In between first and second period she spotted Nick at the other end of the hall. She was tempted to walk to him, but stayed right where she was. If Nick wanted to know about Denman he could contact her.

Finally, a text from Hadley came through.

'No Denman today, but she'll definitely be here tomorrow.'

Rikki let out a long, relieved, exhale. At least she'd been given a small break in the stress. Giving in, she forwarded Hadley's message to Nick. At least she could get through the rest of the day with a clear conscience.

Before too long, Rikki found herself sitting down in Hadley's class. To her utter surprise, Nick dropped down into the desk next to her.

"Spill, what happened with Denman?" He said, without so much as a hello.

Rikki swallowed her annoyance at his brash tone, scooting her desk slightly closer to his so that he could hear her. "She's going to be coming into our class, she knows you and I are here."

"What? When?" Nick cast an alarmed look around the room.

"Tomorrow." Rikki shot him a look. "You know, I would have been glad to tell you all about this last night, when I texted you."

Nick shrugged. "I figured if it was important you would have called."

Rikki looked at Nick out of the corner of her eye as a thought crossed her mind. "Nick..." She moved even closer, lowering her voice. "Does Denman know how Kaitlyn became a mermaid?"

"No, I don't think so." Nick whispered back. "Even when Kaitlyn trusted her she would never tell. Denman was always trying to get it out of her, though."

"Excuse me."

Rikki and Nick looked up at Hadley, who was standing over their desk.

"Class has started, let's cut the chit chat." Hadley said stiffly before walking back to the class, amongst laughter from the other students.

Rikki slunk down into her desk chair, embarrassed at being called out. She kept quiet for the rest of class, as did Nick.

Eventually, the bell rang. Rikki avoided Hadley's gaze and stepped over to Nick's desk to continue her conversation. "Denman will be here tomorrow." She pulled her chair up to him. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm not a mermaid." Nick said quietly, leaning towards her. "She can't force me to talk if I don't want to. I'll just have to ignore her. What will you do?"

"Rikki?" Hadley stood beside her chair, his hands shoved into his pockets. "May I talk to you for a moment?"

"You can talk to both of us." Rikki gestured to Nick. "We were just discussing Dr. Denman."

Hadley didn't seem pleased about talking to Nick, but he pulled a chair across the aisle to sit across the desk from him. "And what did you come up with, _Nick_?" He plainly didn't expect much of an answer.

"I'm going to face her." Nick replied, a rough edge to his voice. "Screw hiding, I'm not scared of her."

"You also don't have as much to lose as Rikki does." Hadley cut in. "So maybe hiding is a better option for her."

"I think it's her choice, isn't it?" Nick raised an eyebrow. "It's her life."

"Hadley, we've talked about this." Rikki said, annoyed at the the two of them. "I'm not going to hide either, I'm just going to convince her I'm still normal."

"Yes, but I've been thinking." Hadley placed one hand over Rikki's, causing Nick to cross his arms. "You _should_ hide. Just don't come to school until Denman leaves. It's the safest plan."

"No, it isn't." Rikki argued, pulling her hand away from his. "If I'm here, the only person I have to worry about is Denman. If I peace out for two or three weeks I have to worry about Mags, my schoolwork, a million unexcused absences, a ton of questions from everyone... No. It's better just to face her."

Nick cast Rikki an approving look. "Sounds like she's got it figured out, teach."

Hadley clenched his jaw, standing. "Well I guess she has nothing to worry about, does she? Now that she has you."

Rikki also stood, anxious to defuse the situation. "Can we all please stop talking about me like I'm not here?" She spoke firmly. "Cut it out, guys."

Hadley turned to face her. "I'm sorry for losing my temper." He said coolly. "Good luck tomorrow." And with that, he turned and walked out of the room.

"Great." Rikki sighed as she sank back into her chair. "Now he's angry."

"Who cares, that guy is a tool." Nick began putting away his things. "You could do better."

Rikki watched Nick walk out of the room, unsure if she'd actually heard a compliment somewhere in there or not.

13. The Hit

****Many apologies for the delay, I had to send my computer away to be repaired! I hope everyone is well! As always, thank you for reading!****

* * *

><p>Neither Hadley nor Nick contacted Rikki the rest of the school day, which suited her just fine. Rikki tried to play it cool, but she felt as if she might snap at any moment from stress. It felt as if someone had pressed fast forward on the clock, the day flew by in one big blur. Rikki spent the day going over and over different ways to trick Denman. If she dried the water the instant she touched it she should be able to avoid changing, right? But how would she explain the steam? Rikki's head ached as she walked in the front door, glad to finally be home.<p>

"Well, look who it is." Mags looked up from the sink, where she was washing lettuce for dinner. "I was beginning to think you'd moved out, you're gone so much."

"Sorry." Rikki dropped her book bag into a kitchen chair. "I've been busy with... school."

"And I want to hear all about it." Mags chopped the lettuce and dropped it into the salad bowl. "Have you been making friends?"

"Yeah, the kids here are really nice." Rikki toyed with the zipper on her jacket as she took a seat at the table.

"Are you ok?" Mags's eyes narrowed as she set the salad on the table. "You seem distracted."

"Tons of homework." Rikki managed a half-hearted smile.

"Ah." Mags nodded. "I was a hard worker too. You'll be glad you worked for the good grades in the long run."

"Right, well..." Rikki stood. "I've got a ton of homework, I'll see

you tomorrow."

"You don't want dinner?" Mags called after her.

"Not hungry." Rikki answered as she trudged up the steps, suddenly exhausted.

The doorbell rang, but Rikki barely noticed it as she walked into her bedroom.

"Rikki!" Mags's voice carried from the front hall to the second floor with ease. "You have a visitor!"

The last thing Rikki felt like doing was going back down the steps, but she dragged herself down anyway. Mags was standing at the front door flipping her hair a bit. Rikki paused, listening to her Aunt giggling shamelessly.

Hadley stood on the front step, wearing a T-shirt and worn-in blue jeans. He caught Rikki's eye as she walked down the steps.

"Oh, I am so sorry, please come in." Mags flashed Hadley a million dollar smile as he walked past her. "Rikki, your teacher is here."

"I see that." Rikki crossed her arms over her chest, still sore from their earlier discussion. "Why?"

"Now Rikki, don't be rude." Mags scolded her. "He's come all the way to see you."

"I was just telling your Aunt about the Quiz Bowl tournament next week." Hadley cleared his throat, locking eyes with Rikki. "You know, we really were glad when you _joined the team._" He clearly wanted Rikki to go along with the story.

"I was just talking to Rikki about how hard work will help her out!" Mags gushed, placing a hand on Hadley's shoulder. "Wasn't I, Rikki?"

"Mags, may I speak to Mr. Cruz in the living room?" Rikki was tired, she wasn't in the mood for chit chat or fake clubs. "About Quiz Bowl." She added lamely.

"Of course, I'll just be in the kitchen." Mags turned to face Hadley. "Are you hungry, Mr. Cruz? You're welcome to join us."

"I've already eaten, but thanks so much for the offer." Hadley smiled warmly at her.

"Awesome." Rikki walked into the living room, checking to make sure Mags was really in the kitchen before turning to face Hadley. "What's up?"

"Sorry, I couldn't call." Hadley shoved his hands in his pockets. "Linda was in the classroom today after school."

"Today?" Rikki frowned. "I thought she wasn't coming in until tomorrow?"

"So did I." Hadley sat on the couch. "But I did get some information, I just wanted to let you know."

"Great, spill." Rikki sat beside him.

"Ok. She's definitely going to be in your class tomorrow. She specifically wants to use you guys, and Rikki," Hadley swallowed. "She was asking a lot of questions. It's a safe bet that she already knows you're the same Rikki Chadwick she knew from Australia."

"What was she asking?" Rikki's mouth felt instantly dry.

"She said she was just doing research, but she asked pretty pointed questions about whether or not I had any exchange students enrolled, whether I minded if she interviewed each of you individually, if she could use a few students for extra research."

"Ok." Rikki nodded. "And this all starts tomorrow?"

"Yes, but I don't think she's going to do any research, she said she wanted to use the first few days to get to know you guys." Hadley said bitterly. "Rikki, I know we've been over this, but I really don't think it's a good idea for you to go to school."

"I know, I don't either." Rikki agreed. "But I'm going to. I have to, and that's that."

"And there's no changing your mind?" Hadley seemed hopeful.

"Nope." Rikki stood. "But thanks for keeping me filled in."

"I'm not trying to fill you in, I'm trying to keep you safe. Denman has a reputation for going to extreme lengths for her research. You can't be there." frustration was clear in Hadley's voice.

"Listen." Rikki spoke evenly. "This is my life, not yours. We've been over this. I'm going to face her."

"I don't agree with your decision. It's only a matter of time before she finds out about you. I can't protect you forever." Hadley's face was stone.

"I don't need anyone protecting me." Rikki felt her temper rising. "Got it?"

"Fine." Hadley stood angrily. "Good luck then." He stood.

"You're leaving?" Mags poked her head out of the kitchen. "So soon?"

"Yes, I've got to be going. It was nice meeting you!" Hadley let himself out the front door.

"You are so lucky. He is cute." Mags winked at Rikki. "A little young, but cute just the same."

"Yeah, he's something." Rikki managed a smile before heading back up the stairs for a night of restless sleep.

* * *

><p>The next morning, Rikki parked right in front of the school. She sat in the car, taking in deep breaths before finally stepping out onto the pavement. She was going to come face to face with Dr. Denman today, and she was terrified. It didn't matter how many times she told herself not to be nervous, her heart wouldn't slow down.<p>

The halls seemed to stretch on indefinitely as Rikki walked to her first class. She saw no sign of Nick, maybe he'd decided to stay home after all.

"Rikki Chadwick, please report to the Principal's Office." A voice echoed over the intercom.

Hope stirred in Rikki's chest. Maybe Nick had thought of a way to get them out of the school for the day. She quickly headed up the hall towards the main entrance. She pushed through the office door, expecting to see Nick waiting for her.

Linda Denman turned around as Rikki walked in. "Rikki." She said warmly, not appearing the least bit surprised. "I must confess, I couldn't believe the coincidence. It's wonderful to see you again."

Rikki suddenly couldn't breathe. Denman looked the same as she had a few years ago, with rippling blonde hair framing delicate features. She was standing less than a foot from her, smiling in a way that didn't make Rikki feel good.

"Rikki, I'm glad you're here." An office assistant stood and hurried over to them. "You are very lucky, young lady. Of all the students here, Dr. Denman has selected you to be her assistant on her latest research project."

"Yes, Rikki, I hope you don't mind." Dr. Denman smiled apologetically. "I was so relieved to see a familiar name on the class roster, I thought we could catch up? And you get to miss a few classes too." She said with a grin.

"What do you think, Rikki?" The office assistant raised her eyebrows.

"I.. uh, I'm sorry, but no." Rikki spoke quickly, trying to keep her tone level. "I... don't want to miss classes, It's hard enough to keep up."

"Then you don't have to. You can assist me after school." Denman's smile didn't quite reach her eyes this time. "No missed classes."

"I'm sorry... I really just don't want to." Rikki said bluntly.

"Rikki!" The office assistant shot Rikki a shocked look. "She doesn't mean that." She turned to Denman. "We are very lucky to have a scientist of your caliber here, Dr. Denman, we'll be glad to assist you in any way possible. Miss Chadwick can certainly miss a few classes, we'll excuse her from any missed assignments."

"Thank you." Denman said coolly. "I'll be in touch, Rikki." She

breezed from the office.

"You are incredibly lucky, Rikki." The office assistant squeezed her arm. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for you."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Rikki muttered as she pushed through the door to head back to her first class.

After her encounter with Denman, the rest of the day seemed boring and slow. Rikki still saw no sign of Nick, so she was unsurprised to see his empty desk as she walked into last period. She was surprised, however, to see Hadley and Denman laughing over a sheet of paper at his desk.

"Class, I'd like to introduce you to an old friend, Dr. Linda Denman." Hadley addressed them. "She's going to be using your brains for a few weeks."

"Weeks?" Rikki groaned quietly.

"Hello, everyone." Denman smiled broadly. "It's a pleasure to meet all of you. I'm sure we'll all get to know each other before you know it. Today I'd just like to start off by talking to each of you individually." Her eyes landed on Rikki. "I need someone to kick off the interviews. How about you, Rik-"

"How about me?" Nick stepped through the classroom door, a confident grin on his face. "Long time no see, Den."

"Nick!" Hadley hissed, horrified at Nick's entrance. "That's no way to speak to someone of Dr. Denman's achievement."

"Oh, it's fine, Mr. Cruz." Denman's eyes had a gleam in them as she gave Nick a level look. "Nick and I go way back. I thought there was another familiar name on that roster."

"You thought right." Nick dropped his bag at his desk. "So where are these interviews taking place?"

"My office." Denman nodded curtly to the door. "I'll lead the way."

"Spectacular." Nick rolled his eyes as he followed her out into the hall.

Rikki couldn't believe the way Nick had breezed in and saved her from a one on one session with Dr. Denman. Hadley seemed equally as shocked as he watched the pair leaving.

"Ok then." Hadley clenched his jaw as he turned back to the rest of the students.

Rikki didn't pay attention to the lesson being taught. She couldn't help watching the clock as the minutes passed. What was taking Nick and Denman so long? Surely they didn't have this much to talk about.

Class was nearly over by the time the two reappeared. Both wore grim expressions, though Denman's immediately relaxed as she faced the rest of the class. She pulled Hadley to the side of the room,

speaking quietly with him for a few moments before leaving the room.

"Sorry." Nick muttered as he dropped into the desk next to Rikki.

The bell rang, cutting Rikki off before she could say anything back. Nick hurried from the room without another word. He gave Rikki a meaningful look as he walked.

Rikki threw her things into her bag, trying to catch up with him. She turned the corner, running head on into Dr. Denman, who was walking into the room.

"Oh, sorry." Rikki dropped down to pick up the papers scattered over the floor.

"I know you're still a mermaid." Denman spoke into Rikki's ear as the pair crouched on the floor, so quietly Rikki couldn't believe she'd actually heard the words.

Rikki couldn't move. She couldn't breath. The room seemed to spin as she remained on the floor, her hand frozen as it reached for a sheet of fallen paper.

Denman threw Rikki an icy smirk as she stood, looking down at her. She walked out of the classroom, her heels clicking lightly on the tile floor.

Hadley had been standing at the front of the room, watching them. "Are you ok?" He asked Rikki, but he didn't get an answer. He hurried after Denman a moment later, squeezing Rikki's shoulder as he passed her.

"Nick said he was sorry." Rikki spoke to herself, barely able to force the words out. It looked like she knew now what he was so damn sorry about.

14. The Deal

Rikki didn't remember the drive home. Suddenly she found herself walking through her front door. She dropped her keys into the bowl beside the door, her mind numb. She'd known that Nick was a bit of a loose cannon, but he'd done so much to look out for her... how could he stab her in the back like that? Sure, he was sullen, rude, and unfriendly, but Rikki had at least felt like he was trustworthy.

Time passed, Rikki watched as the sun set, leaving the kitchen in total darkness. Mags had not yet come home from work, she noted. At some point she wrote an email and sent it to Lewis, updating him on Denman. She told him not to tell Cleo or Bella, she didn't want them to worry, but she thought he should know what was going on just in case.

Slowly, gradually, Rikki realized that the hurt she'd felt so strongly had turned into something else completely.

She was angry. No, not just angry, _incensed. _What right did Nick

have to tell Denman her secret? Who did he think he was?

Fuming, Rikki jumped to her feet, causing the chair to clatter to the ground behind her. She snatched her keys and marched out of the door, slamming it shut behind her.

There was no car in the driveway when she pulled up in front of the house, but Rikki could see Nick's bedroom light on. She didn't bother to knock or wait to be let in. Not caring how much noise she made, she dashed up the stairs and barged right into Nick's room.

"Jesus, Rikki, what the hell-" Nick jumped as she flew inside.

"Shut up." Rikki said forcefully, her face full of rage. "You don't get to talk right now, Nick."

Nick held up his hands, his face screwed up in confusion. "What did I-"

"You know exactly what you did!" Rikki yelled. "How could you?"

"How could I what?" Nick shouted back, matching her volume. "What are you talking about?"

"You told Denman." Rikki felt her voice cracking as she struggled to retain whatever composure she had left. "You told her about me. I thought I could trust you, Nick." She shoved his shoulders hard, forcing him back several steps.

"She already knew!" Nick's face was angry. "I didn't tell her anything she didn't already know, Rik, so someone else must have told her. Not me."

"Yeah right." Rikki spoke bitterly. "No one else knows, other than you and Hadley."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "And you really think he's trustworthy? Really? He's practically best friends with Denman. I mean, think about it. How do you really know that he isn't holed up with her right now telling her everything he knows about you."

"He wouldn't do that." Rikki said stiffly, though she was shaken.

"You have no idea what he would or wouldn't do, and you know it." Nick's tone was so quiet it was frightening. "Listen, because I'm only going to relive this once. As soon as I sat down in her office Denman leaned across the desk, looked me dead in the eye, and said that she knew you were still a mermaid. I spent the next hour trying to convince her otherwise. She knew already, Rikki. And she knew that I knew it too."

Rikki swallowed as she desperately searched for a comeback. "How do I know you're telling me the truth? How do I know you didn't tell?"

"You don't." Nick clenched his jaw. "But I don't care if you believe me. That's what trust is about, Rik. It's about believing someone without any proof that you should."

Rikki had nothing to say. She stood there, panting as she tried to catch her breath.

"I'm sure you can find your way out, you got yourself in here easily enough." Nick dropped into his desk chair and picked up a pencil, making a point to ignore Rikki.

Rikki stood there awkwardly, unsure of what to do or say next. It was several seconds before she found words. "You apologised." She said quietly. "You said you were sorry"

"Yeah, I did." Nick didn't look up. "I meant that I was sorry I couldn't convince Denman you were human. I would have explained more but the bell rang. Plus, I didn't think it would be too good for Denman to see us talking too much. I wrote you a note explaining everything. I was going to drop it off at your place tonight." He inclined his head to a folded piece of notebook paper on the edge of his desk. "Read it if you don't believe me."

Hesitantly, Rikki reached for the paper and unfolded it. Sure enough, it was a long letter detailing exactly what he'd just told her. That Denman already knew what she was, that she needed to be careful. At the end of the letter he'd written 'I need you to be safe, ok? Call me anytime and I'll be there to help anyway I can. -N'

"You really didn't tell her." She spoke, more to herself than to him.

"Nope." The anger in Nick's voice was still clear. "Why don't you barge into your boyfriend's house and question him?"

"Nick..." Rikki felt terrible. "I'm sorry. I should have talked to you first."

"You think?" Nick didn't turn around.

"I mean it, I-" Rikki started towards him.

"Stop." Nick flipped around in his chair, stopping Rikki in her tracks. "I really don't want to hear it."

"But I-"

"No." Nick stood, fire in his eyes. "I can't believe you would think for two seconds that I would walk into that _woman's_ office and tell her that you're a mermaid. After all I've been through with her, after all she's taken from me..." He shook his head. "Just don't talk to me."

"I'll go then." Rikki took a couple steps backwards.

"Good." Nick turned back to his homework, not looking as Rikki walked out of the room and out of the house.

That night was the longest night she'd ever experienced. She tossed and turned, having fitful nightmares that never seemed to end.

Rikki walked into school the next day feeling like a zombie. Denman could have popped out at any second, but Rikki wasn't sure that she cared. She already knew everything, what was left? Deep down, Rikki

knew that there was plenty more Denman could do to hurt her or ruin her life, but Rikki couldn't make herself panic.

Nick didn't show up at school that day, not even for Mr. Cruz's class. Rikki hadn't expected him to, but she felt disappointed all the same. Denman continued interviewing students, shooting cool glances at Rikki every time she walked into the room.

Rikki had already packed up her things when the bell rang. Denman stepped in front of her, blocking her way out of the room.

"Rikki." She spoke with a warm smile on her face. "I'd like a word with you in my office. Now." She smirked as she turned to walk up to the front of the classroom.

"Uh, actually-" Hadley stepped in, an anxious expression on his face. "I need Rikki to, um, run to the office right quick, it's important."

"I'm sure someone else can do it." Denman laughed, smiling brightly at Hadley. "I'd like to speak with Rikki."

"It's ok, Hadley." Rikki managed a wry smile. "I'll be glad to run the errand later." She shot Hadley an 'it's ok, don't worry' look and followed Denman out into the hall.

"So, Rikki." Denman's smile faded into a smirk as they sat down at her desk. "How long have you been a mermaid? Did you ever really lose your powers?" She leaned forward on her elbows. "How did you and your friends trick me?"

"I'm not telling you anything." Rikki said firmly. "You can't force me."

"Ah, see, you're very wrong." Denman's eyes pierced Rikki's. "You see, if you're a mermaid, I'd say it was a safe bet to guess that Miss Cleo and Miss Emma are still mermaids as well, yes?"

Rikki crossed her hands over her chest, not making a sound.

"Well, that's easy enough to test, isn't it?" Denman gave Rikki an icy smile. "All I'd really have to do is toss a little water on them, right? And then I'd know the answer pretty quick."

Rikki still refused to answer, shooting daggers at Denman with her eyes.

"That's why I have an offer for you." Denman spoke quietly, scarily. "You tell me everything I want to know. Everything. And I won't go after your friends. I'll leave them alone to live their lives the way they please but you're mine until I say otherwise."

"You can't do that." Rikki leaned forward in her chair. "I'm a human being, you can't hold me hostage."

"You haven't been human for years." Denman scowled. "You're a fish, a freak. And you're what's going to make me a legend. Everyone will know my name after I release my research on actual mermaids. Complete with proof, of course."

Rikki could feel sweat breaking out on her forehead. "How did you know?" She had to ask, she had to know. "Who told you?"

Denman raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't sure, for a bit. I recognised your name, of course, and it was easy to find out you were the same Rikki I'd known in Australia, but were you a mermaid or not?"

"How did you find out?" Rikki spoke slowly.

Denman's expression was cocky. "You should really tell Hadley to watch out what he writes on paper. He wrote right on the reservation book that he and you were using the practice pool at the university. That was a pretty solid clue, enough for me to believe you weren't human. Though I'm surprised he didn't tell me himself..." She looked at Rikki thoughtfully. "And then there was Mr. Donovan's interview yesterday. He confirmed it, that you were definitely a fish."

"He did tell you." Rikki exhaled.

"Not in words." Denman laughed. "But he was so desperate to convince me you were normal. Any other student would have burst out laughing when I told them that you were a mermaid, but not him." She laughed harder. "He turned positively pale! And then he spent forever telling me that I was wrong, you were completely normal!" Denman leaned back in her chair, a satisfied look on her face. "I couldn't believe my luck. It's a shame, I always thought he was smarter than his idiot sister."

"You can't do this." Rikki's voice cracked. "You can't take over my life."

"It's your choice, dear." Denman raised her eyebrows. "Of course, if you decide not to be my little assistant I can always hop on down to Australia and... ask Cleo if maybe she'd be interested?" Her tone deepened. "We can do this together, with you working with me and your friends safe in their ignorance. Or I can toss a bottle of water on you and start snapping pictures, then go to Australia and do the same thing to your friends. It's up to you."

Rikki took in a long breath, opening and closing her fists as her mind raced. "I need some time to think about it."

Denman laughed lightly. "Of course." She said patronizingly. "You have one hour. Meet me at the training pool then, or I start making phone calls to travel agencies."

Rikki stood, pushing her way from Denman's office and racing outside to her car. She needed to be alone, she needed to think.

It seemed things were against her from every direction. Nick was sitting on Rikki's front step as she pulled up to the house.

"I can't talk right now." Rikki tried to push past him but he blocked her way.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper yesterday." Nick blocked her again. "How did it go today with Denman?" He caught her by the shoulders.

"Oh, just fine." Rikki said bitterly, shaking free of his grip and unlocking the front door. "I have to work with her and tell her

everything or she's going to expose my friends as mermaids."

"What?" Nick followed her inside. "There are more of you?"

"Three more, but Denman knew about two of them already. She found out about them at the same time she found out about me." Rikki paced the floor anxiously. "Now that she knows I'm still a mermaid she's threatening to catch them too if I don't cooperate."

"That witch." Nick sank into a chair, shock clear on his face. "I can't believe she'd stoop that low."

"It shouldn't matter to you, you're not in any danger." Rikki leaned on the kitchen counter, wishing she could splash cool water on her face without growing a tail.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there today." Nick spoke gently. "I couldn't face her."

"And I got to do it alone. Thanks." Rikki knew Nick wasn't at fault in any way, but she needed to blame someone other than herself. She resumed pacing quickly back and forth.

"Hey-" Nick reached for her arm, stopping her as she passed him. "It's going to be alright."

"How?" Rikki yanked her arm out of his grasp. "She's going to do tests on me, she wants me to tell her everything. I can't even run away, she'll go after my friends. Emma is still out of the country but Cleo is still at home! And if she finds out about Cleo she'll definitely find out about Bella too, and it's all my fault-"

Nick caught Rikki in his arms, wrapping them around her in a tight hug. Rikki hated herself for it, but she felt tears stinging at the corners of her eyes.

Nick tightened his embrace, easily rocking Rikki back and forth. She allowed her head to drop onto his shoulder, breathing heavily.

"We're going to figure this out." Nick spoke in a voice more gentle than she'd ever heard him use. It almost sounded like a completely different person. "There's got to be a way to convince her not to go through with this."

Rikki didn't say anything. It felt good to be held in Nick's strong arms, to be comforted even though she didn't believe his words. After several minutes had passed she felt her breathing begin to slow.

"Are you alright?" Nick cupped her face in his hands, gently wiping away a tear with his thumb.

Rikki didn't recognise the boy in front of her. His face was kind, concerned for her. His eyes were open and warm, looking deeply into hers from mere inches away.

"I've got to get to the University." Rikki stepped away from him. "She told me to be there in an hour."

"And you're just going to go?" Nick followed her to the front door.

"I don't have a choice." Rikki said, defeated.

"Then I'm going with you." Nick said confidently.

"No, you don't have to do that." Rikki rested her hand on the doorknob. "This isn't your problem."

"No, it isn't." Nick shook his head. "But you need someone in your corner."

Rikki gave him a long look. "Fine. I'll drive." She pulled open the door and gasped.

Someone was standing on the front step, fist poised, ready to knock.

Zane tilted his head to one side, giving Rikki and Nick an appraising look. "I guess you didn't expect company?" He said coolly.

Rikki looked from Zane to Nick, then to Zane again. Now things were really complicated.

15. Big Heads and Butting In

"Z- Zane!" Rikki stammered, hardly believing he was really there. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Lewis told me everything." Zane's eyes rested on Nick for several seconds before focusing back on Rikki. He reached for her hand, taking it in his. "I got on the first flight to Florida."

"That's really nice of you." Rikki didn't want to offend him by pulling her hand away, but she didn't particularly feel like standing there anymore. "But I've got to get going, there's a slight problem I've got to get sorted..."

"I'll help." Zane said quickly. "Is it about..." His eyes flickered once again over to Nick. "Would you mind leaving us alone for a bit?"

"It's ok, Zane." Rikki cut in, as Nick folded his arms across his chest. "Nick, well, he knows everything."

"Everything?" Zane's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Rikki..." He pulled her by the elbow, dragging her outside. He spoke to her under his breath as they walked. "You mean to tell me that this stranger knows that you're a... a... you-know-what?"

"Yes, Zane." Rikki yanked her arm from his grasp. "He knows that I'm a mermaid, he knows all about Denman, and I don't have time to explain all of it to you right now, ok?"

Zane's face fell slightly, but he quickly covered it. "Where do you have to go so urgently that you can't tell me?"

"Oh, just get in the car. Both of you!" She called loud enough for

Nick to hear. "I'll explain on the way."

After a small battle over which boy would sit next to Rikki in the front seat (Zane won, Nick laughed a bit as he climbed into the back), the car finally pointed it's way towards Palm U. Rikki quickly told Zane an abridged version of how Nick knew what she was, choosing to spend more time telling him about the ultimatum Denman had given her.

"You can't give in to her." Zane said firmly. "No way, Rikki, it's idiotic."

"And what brilliant ideas do you have, then?" Rikki raised her shoulders.

Zane ticked the items off on his fingers. "Run away, leave town, warn Bella and Cleo and Emma so they can do the same, change your name, change-

"She can't be on the run for the rest of her life, though." Nick spoke up from the back seat.

Zane bristled at Nick's interruption. "If it'll keep her safe I'd bet she could."

"No, Zane, running isn't an option." Rikki spoke carefully. "I couldn't do it, and there's no way I could expect everyone else to either, Cleo loves home too much and Emma would never want to leave her family."

Zane clenched his jaw, shooting Nick a scathing glare. "So how long did you two wait before you got together?" He snapped at her. "One day? Two?"

"What are you talking about?" Rikki checked the time. They still had fifteen minutes to get to the practice pool.

"Well, this is the guy, right?" Zane's tone grew cooler. "The guy you kissed? The one you broke up with me for?"

"What? No!" Rikki said indignantly as Nick snorted from the back seat.

"Really? So it was another guy?" Zane pushed. "My, you've sure been busy since you left Australia." He slumped down in his seat.

"Zane Bennett." Rikki's tone was harsh, silencing him immediately. "Do you honestly think that's what we should be talking about right now?"

Zane didn't answer, he just slumped further down into his seat. He didn't say another word during the ride.

Rikki parked in front of the nondescript brown door, looking up and down the walkways for Dr. Denman. She saw no sign of her. Nick opened his car door as the engine cut off.

"Whoa, whoa." Zane cut Rikki off at the entrance. "What are you going to say to her?"

Rikki gave Zane a level look and pushed past him through the door, followed closely by Zane and Nick. Zane shoved Nick roughly as they walked, pushing him to the back of their small group.

Dr. Denman was standing at the edge of the pool when they walked in. She turned to look at them as they barged inside, surprise clear on her face. "I expected you to come alone." She told Rikki pointedly.

"Yeah, well, I didn't." Rikki couldn't spare a thought for the two boys, she needed to say what she'd come to say before she changed her mind. "I've made a decision, Denman."

"Yes?" Denman raised an eyebrow, placing her hands on her hips. "Go on."

Rikki took in a deep breath. "I've decided to--"

"She's going to need a contractual agreement." Zane stepped in front of Rikki, effectively cutting her off. He crossed his arms over his chest as he spoke confidently.

"Excuse me?" Rikki muttered under her breath.

"You don't know anything about business deals." Zane whispered back. "Now step back and let me handle this."

More out of shock than actual obedience, Rikki watched as Zane approached Denman.

"I wasn't aware you were in the country, Mr. Bennett." Denman cast Zane an appraising look.

Zane ignored her. "Rikki has decided to work with you, against my judgement." He said haughtily. "But she has conditions."

"She isn't in any position to make demands." Denman's voice rose slightly.

"It's a law, Denman." Zane spoke calmly. "Rikki is, by law, a citizen of Australia, not a piece of personal property. If you intend to hold her against her will you would have to prove that she is not capable of making rational decisions or thinking as a human, and I think you'd have a pretty hard time proving that." He casually shoved his hands into his pockets. "Sure, you can try to expose her secret on your own, but it'll be harder than you think."

Denman's eyes narrowed. "And why is that?"

Zane took a step closer to her, a familiar cockiness setting into his eyes. "Sure, you can catch her, or one of her friends off guard and snap a picture. You may even get a few witnesses." He smirked. "But I've seen what these girls can do, and they can dry off in a matter of seconds. Pictures can be doctored, Linda. You'll have a pretty hard time convincing the world's scientists that you've documented an actual mermaid."

"I just need the right opportunity." Denman tapped her foot on the floor.

"Yes, but wouldn't it be _so much easier_ if Rikki cooperated? Helped you prove it?" Zane said easily.

Rikki stiffened, drawing in a sharp breath.

"We'll draw up a contract detailing exactly what Rikki agrees to." Zane stood tall. "You'll give us a week to do so, then you can review it yourself to make sure all is satisfactory. Then you both sign and you can go about whatever it is you want. Within the limits of the contract, of course." Zane added.

Dr. Denman took a long moment, sizing Zane up with her blue eyes. "Alright." She said with a condescending smile. "Take your week. Put together whatever terms you wish. This conversation will be continued." She raised an eyebrow at Rikki, then swept from the pool, leaving the Rikki, Zane, and Nick alone.

"What were you _thinking?_" Rikki swatted Zane hard across the arm. "So I'm working _with_ Denman now? Cooperating?"

"You were willing to be her slave." Zane shot back.

"Being forced to work with her was better than doing so with a smile on my face!" Rikki said shrilly. "What will the others say when they hear that I'm working with Denman to expose our secret?"

"They'd better damn say 'Thanks, Rikki! We'd all be exposed without you!'" Zane said in a mocking girly voice. "At least I got you a few more days, and you get to put your terms in writing."

"As if she'd hold to that!" Rikki paced. "Denman won't stick with some paper contract, not once she gets tangible proof of mermaids!"

"The way my father can make a contract, she will!" Zane was shouting at this point. "Ironclad, she'll go to prison if she violates the terms we can set."

"So now your father is going to know about me too?" Rikki's hands flew to her hips. "Thanks, Zane, we're doing a _great_ job keeping this secret."

"My Dad already knew once, remember?" Zane's voice became quiet and cold. "And if you really want to talk about secret-keeping skills, well..." His eyes landed pointedly on Nick, who hadn't said a word since they'd walked inside. "I'm not sure I'm the one with a problem keeping secrets." He looked at Rikki, with an expression that revealed an equal mixture of anger, defiance, and, deep down, hurt.

"You kissed someone else too." Rikki kept her emotions in check. "This wasn't all my fault." She took a step closer to him.

Zane's jaw clenched. "You can't handle this yourself. You need me here."

Fury raced through Rikki's veins. "I don't _need_ anyone, Zane. If all you're going to do is boss me around then you can get out of here."

Zane frowned. "But I-"

"Get out!" Rikki shouted. "Go back home!"

"Fine." Zane's voice was ice cold as he spoke. He pushed roughly past Rikki, knocking her backwards as he stormed from the pool room.

Rikki stumbled back several feet, forgetting that she'd been near the edge of the pool. She went into the water with a splash, cursing under her breath as she submerged.

Zane paused at the exit when he heard the splash, but pushed the door open and left without so much as a backward glance.

Nick pushed off of the wall he'd been leaning on, casually walking to the water's edge. He sat cross legged on the concrete, waiting for Rikki to surface.

"Well... it's been a long time since I've seen this up close." He said jokingly as Rikki propped herself up on her elbows at the edge of the pool. "So, uh..." He nodded back towards the exit. "That's the boyfriend, huh?"

"Ex." Rikki said humourlessly. She'd never been more sure she'd made the right decision in breaking up with him. This was not the same Zane she'd fallen in love with. Of course, she reminded herself, he was probably still just upset from their breakup.

Rikki's mind flickered back to Denman, and the smile she'd had on her face as she'd walked away. Something didn't feel right, it was as if Denman had given up too easily. Rikki knew she'd never hold to a paper contract. Sure, Zane had bought them a week, but not much else. Rikki would be completely vulnerable once Denman had irrefutable proof, and Denman knew it.

Nick's brow furrowed as he watched the wheels turning in Rikki's head. "Come on." He held out a hand to her. "Let's get out of here."

Rikki allowed him to pull her out of the water and onto the edge of the pool. Nick turned around to give her some privacy as she dried off and her legs reappeared.

"Grab your keys." Nick held the door open for her, enjoying the breeze that flowed into the tiny pool room. "We need a break."

"What do you mean, a break?" Rikki unlocked the car and took her seat in the driver's side.

"Head towards my place." Nick rolled down the front window, inhaling the fresh air. "It's Friday, and we're young. We're going to enjoy ourselves for once."

16. Not Like That

Rikki did as Nick asked, parking her car across the street from Nick's house. "What exactly did you have in mind?" She asked hesitantly.

Nick pulled a set of keys from his pocket, a good natured smirk on his face. "We're going boating."

In no time at all, Rikki found herself sitting in the co-captain's seat aboard Nick's small boat.

"One second." Nick pulled a yellow raincoat from the shelf below their chairs. "Toss this on, in case of ocean spray."

Rikki did as he told her, zipping up the bright jacket as she sat back down. "We can't stay out late, ok? I need to do damage control with Zane, make sure he's heading back to Australia."

Nick pretended not to hear her as the boat's engine roared to life. Soon, they were speeding through the water, wind whipping through their hair as they powered through the waves.

"I used to come out on the water with Kaitlyn." Nick shouted over the roar of the engine. "She loved it."

Rikki's face broke out into a huge smile as they sped along. This was great. The smell of the ocean, the salty taste of the sea in the air, the feeling of freedom... She looked over at Nick, who seemed completely relaxed as he steered.

Time passed by quickly as they enjoyed themselves, and too soon the sun was beginning to set.

"Check it out." Nick leaned in so that she could hear him, then nodded to a brightly lit town up the coast.

Bright lights shone out over the water, it appeared that some small coastal town was hosting a fair.

"Let's check it out." Nick steered the boat towards the docks.

"It's getting late..." Rikki checked the time. "I really should be getting back to the house."

"Well I'm going to the carnival." Nick tied the boat off at the anchor point. "I need to relax and I've always had a soft spot for cotton candy." He jumped off of the boat and landed hard on the docks below before turning to look up at Rikki. "I'd like your company, but you can always swim back to my place if you want to." He started up the boardwalk toward the lights.

Rikki watched him go, tempted to dive into the waves. With her speed, she knew it would only be a matter of minutes before she made it back to Nick's house. Still...

Making up her mind, Rikki jumped off the boat and jogged to catch up with Nick. He was absolutely right, it was Friday and they deserved a break.

"I thought you'd make the right decision." Nick threw Rikki a rare grin as they approached the fair's entrance.

"Hi, kids!" The overly enthusiastic lady behind the ticket booth smiled toothily at them. "You picked a terrific night to join us,

couples get in half price!"

"Oh," Rikki shook her head. "We're actually not a-

"See, honey?" Nick quickly grabbed her hand in his. "I told you I had a good feeling about going out tonight." He raised an eyebrow at her, making Rikki laugh at his expression. He paid their way in and the pair stepped inside.

There seemed to be nothing but happy couples walking around the fairgrounds, snapping pictures and smacking kisses. Signs littered the area, labelling tonight as 'couples night.' Rikki rolled her eyes at the third couple batting their eyelashes at each other.

In spite of her cynicism, Rikki had to admit that the fair was a blast. Brightly colored lights illuminated rides and games all up and down the walkway. They rode ride after ride, enjoying the thrill as their stomachs flipped over. Occasionally, Nick would grab onto Rikki's arm, trying not to yell as their car turned around. The games were equally as fun, though they were almost too easy for the pair. Nick won a little blue bear, which he immediately gave to Rikki.

"Watch this." Nick gripped the heavy hammer over his head and swung it down, causing the metal runner to clang loudly on the metal bell above them. "Heck yes." Nick cheered for himself. "Told ya."

Rikki laughed, marvelling at the transformation that Nick had gone through that evening. Never in a million years would Rikki have expected to find herself playing at a fair with Nick Donovan. Or to enjoy being at a fair with Nick Donovan. No longer was he sullen and brooding. No, this Nick was laughing and easy to spend time with.

"Two seats left!" A carnie called at them. "Two seats left on our haunted tunnel!"

"C'mon." Nick pushed Rikki towards the entrance.

"I'm going, I'm going." Rikki jogged to the entrance to the ride.

"Best two seats on the train." The carnie gave them a toothless grin as he showed them to the last empty car. "It's scary, son." He winked at Nick. "You make your lady feel safe, you hear?"

Rikki and Nick laughed awkwardly, careful to sit with plenty of room between them.

The ride may have been frightening to some, but Rikki didn't notice. She was too conscious of Nick sitting next to her in the dark. Slowly, deliberately, she moved closer to him so that their knees were touching. Nick seemed to stiffen, or maybe it was all in Rikki's head, but he didn't move away.

The train came to a stop a few minutes later. Neither Rikki nor Nick had been scared, but it didn't stop the same carnie from picking on them as they exited.

"Can't you see how shaken she is?" He patted Nick's shoulder,

obviously feeling like he was doing him a favor. "You gotta comfort her, boy."

Nick obligingly slid a hand around Rikki's waist, pulling her in tightly. "There, better?" He asked Rikki sarcastically.

Rikki only laughed in response. "Hungry?"

"Starved." Nick pointed. "Let's go over there."

The lady behind the food stand beamed at the two of them. "You two are an adorable couple." She gushed. "How long have you been together?"

"Three months." "A year." They spoke simultaneously.

"Oh." The lady looked confused but didn't press the issue. "Well, you're just precious."

"_Precious_?" Rikki screwed up her face as they walked away with their late-night meal.

"Almost made me lose my appetite. Almost." Nick agreed as he shoved half of a cheeseburger into his mouth.

The rest of the night passed by in a flash. Eventually the number of milling couples began to dwindle and lights began to shut off one by one. It was late at night by the time Rikki and Nick started the engine and pointed the boat towards home. Rikki couldn't believe how relaxed she felt, as if her muscles had been replaced with new ones.

The ride back was much slower, as if Nick wanted to make the trip last as long as possible. The pair shared easy conversation as they rocked back and forth, laughing occasionally at the other's joke.

"Won't your mother be worried about you being out so late?" Rikki closed her phone after sending Mags a text telling her not to worry.

"Yeah, right." Nick laughed, a tinge of bitterness in his voice. "You know, some parents lose a kid and immediately become nazi parents, keeping their other kids under lock and key. Others just stop caring." He leaned in, as if telling Rikki a secret. "Mine are type B."

"But your parents must care about you." Rikki remembered how kind Nick's mother had been when she'd met her.

"Oh, I'm not saying they don't love me." Nick shook his head. "But since Kaitlyn died they've both been different. They work longer hours, they're hardly ever home, and..." He nudged Rikki. "They could care less where I am or what I'm doing." He shrugged. "It suits me, I guess."

"I'm sorry, that's rough." Rikki said quietly.

"No big deal, I'm used to it." Nick looked over at her. "Hey, thanks for playing along tonight."

"What?" Rikki puzzled. "Oh, right, sure. No problem."

"I just needed to get out of town for a bit." Nick continued.
"There's too much drama going on."

"Thanks for suggesting it, tonight was fun." Rikki stifled a yawn.

Nick suddenly burst out laughing. "How many people called us a cute couple tonight? Five? Six?" He snickered. "We sure faked everyone out. As if you and I would ever work as a couple."

Rikki's eyes narrowed. "Why not?" She blurted out before she could stop herself.

Nick looked at Rikki, surprised. "Why not?" He echoed.

Rikki hadn't meant to ask the question, but she wasn't going to back down now that she had. "What's so ridiculous about you and me being a couple?"

Nick shook his head, keeping his eyes locked on the water in front of him. "Well... for one thing, we're too alike." He began firmly.

"Too alike?" Rikki frowned. "How are we-"

"Yes." Nick cut her off. "We're too alike. And then there's the fact that you're going back to Australia at the end of the semester. What would be the point in becoming a couple just to break it all off in a few months?" His tone became terse. "I've already told you that you remind me of my sister. And, and this is really the only reason that counts..." He swallowed. "I just don't have those kinds of feelings for you, Rik. I mean, you're fun to hang around with, but as a friend. Nothing more." He kept his eyes forward as he finished speaking.

"Ok..." Rikki said slowly, processing his answer. "Thanks for your... honesty I guess."

"Hey." Nick threw his arm over her shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to hurt your feelings." He sighed. "I kinda suck at talking to people."

"Don't worry about it." Rikki pulled the corners of her lips into a smile.

"No, seriously." Nick rubbed his hand up and down Rikki's arm. "You're awesome, Rikki. You're funny, and cool, and... well you're just great. Anyone would be lucky to be with you, ok? Well, except for that Zane dude. He's kind of a prick."

Rikki laughed in spite of herself. As much as she wanted to pout or feel upset at Nick's bluntness, she really did like being around him. If they were only going to be friends... well, she could be alright with that. She took in a long sigh, putting any thoughts she may have had about dating Nick in the back of her head, and resolved to move on.

The pair resumed their easy conversation, telling each other stories

of their childhood as they made their way through the sea.

Rikki yawned several minutes later, letting her head fall onto Nick's shoulder. "Is this alright?" She murmured sleepily."

"I've been told I make a great pillow." Nick lowered his voice as Rikki breathed deeply. "You know, back in elementary school there was this girl named Molly, and she used to use my stomach as a pillow every day during nap time."

Rikki laughed without opening her eyes, feeling herself begin to drift away with sleep.

"Plus," Nick spoke quietly, almost to himself. "I think you've already found yourself a boyfriend."

"No..." Rikki said sleepily, barely awake. "I already told you, Zane and I broke up."

"I wasn't talking about Zane." Nick whispered, thinking about the way Hadley looked at Rikki in class, and Zane's comment about the guy Rikki had kissed. "I wasn't talking about him at all."

Rikki didn't know how much time had passed. She felt herself gently rocking back and forth, a cool breeze hitting her face. Her eyelids fluttered open as she tried to remember where she was.

She was still on Nick's boat, her head resting on his shoulder. Inhaling sharply, she sat up and stretched her arms high over her head. They were anchored back at Nick's house. She yawned loudly as she gently nudged Nick, who was also asleep. His head rested on the ledge to his other side, and he swatted sleepily at Rikki's hand.

"Ten more minutes." He muttered.

"Nick." Rikki whispered. Seeing no movement, she leaned in closer. _"Nick!_"

This time he sat up, looking around through bleary eyes. He finally focused in on Rikki. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes, you fell asleep." Rikki hissed as she looked for her phone. "Why didn't you wake me up when we got back?"

"You were sleeping so soundly." Nick rubbed his fists in his eyes. "I didn't want to wake you."

"Well thanks." Rikki groaned as she checked her phone. "Mags is going to _kill_ me."

"Just tell her you were out with a friend." Nick shrugged, cracking his shoulders as he stood.

"I will, but it'll be a miracle if she believes me." Rikki carefully climbed off of the boat and onto the wooden dock.

"But you had a fun night." Nick jumped onto the dock beside her.

"Yes." Rikki could feel her frustration melting. "I did have fun tonight. Thank you."

"No problem." Nick gave her a slightly sad, lopsided smile as he walked up towards his house's back door. "See you around."

"Yeah, Nick." Rikki waved at him as he disappeared inside. "See you around."

17. Full Moon A'coming

It was well past eleven that morning when Rikki finally opened her eyes. She sat up in bed, sleepily stretching her arms up over her head as she yawned. Rikki groaned as she let herself fall back onto her pillows. What was she going to do today?

Rikki made a quick mental list of the things she needed to do, which mostly included buying supplies for her English project. She spared a quick thought for Dr. Denman, but she didn't know what she could do today to fix anything, so Rikki pushed the thought from her head. Against her will, she realized she would have to call Zane soon to get details on whatever contract he was going to have drawn up.

An alarm bleeped on Rikki's phone. She reached for it and slid it open, trying to remember what it had been set for.

Rikki's heart sank as she looked at her phone. Three simple words were illuminated on the screen, but those three simple words were enough to make her breath catch in her throat.

'Full Moon Tonight.'

Crap. The girls had pretty much gotten the hang of the full moons back home, but that was with three of them watching out for one another. The idea of facing one by herself was a little daunting..

Rikki quickly dialed Lewis's number, wanting to get a little guidance for the full moon, and was just about to press 'call' when she heard a male voice carrying up the stairs.

Rikki frowned, dropping the phone on the bed. Who was at the house?

Zane? Rikki grimaced as she pulled on a quick Tshirt and shorts. She knew she needed to talk to him, but it wasn't exactly the way she wanted to start her day.

No... the more Rikki listened, the more it didn't sound like Zane.

Nick! Rikki hurried to pull a brush through her hair, eager to get downstairs. Nick could help her out tonight, he'd almost certainly know how to handle full moons.

Rikki dashed down the steps, coming to an abrupt stop when she saw who was sitting at her kitchen table.

"Good morning, Rikki." Hadley flashed her a bright smile as she

approached the table. "Sorry for the intrusion."

"I keep telling you." Mags set a steaming bowl of scrambled eggs on the table and scooped some onto Hadley's plate. "It's no intrusion!" She focused on Rikki. "You got in awfully late last night?"

"Yeah... I was out with a friend." Rikki said hesitantly as she took a seat.

"Right." Mags wasn't even paying attention to Rikki's words as she beamed at Hadley.

"So, Rikki." Hadley self consciously brushed his hair out of his eyes. "I've brought you the extra study materials you asked me for."

"Isn't that nice?" Mags spoke up. "Rikki, you are so lucky to have such an interactive teacher, seriously."

"Yeah, don't I know it." Rikki eyed Hadley suspiciously. "I'm assuming you want to review the materials? In the other room?"

"Exactly." Hadley smiled warmly at Mags. "Won't you excuse me?"

"Take your time, take your time." Mags waved him away.

"You know, she's going to start asking questions if you keep popping up at my house." Rikki shut the kitchen door behind them. "What's up?"

"Not a lot, I just felt like I should check in on you." Hadley spoke casually as he sat on the couch.

"I'm fine, Hadley." Rikki sighed as she slumped beside him on the couch.

"Well, you can't blame me for worrying." Hadley sat up defensively. "You haven't told me much lately." He shot a look at her. "What's the latest from Dr. Denman?"

"Oh, not a lot, just her ultimatum." Rikki said sarcastically.

"Her what?" Hadley frowned.

Rikki sat up, her eyes narrowing. "You mean she didn't tell you?"

"No." Hadley moved a little closer to her. "What ultimatum?"

"The ultimatum where she exposes my friends as mermaids if I don't agree to act as her personal test subject." Rikki said bitterly.

Hadley's eyes opened wide. "You mean, she knows that you're a-"

"Yes she does." Rikki nodded blankly. "She knows I'm a mermaid."

Hadley shook his head in disbelief. "But how-

"It really doesn't matter." Rikki wasn't getting into that conversation right now."

Hadley dropped back down onto the couch, shock evident on his face. "I can't believe she'd really do that to you." He said quietly.

"Well, believe it." Rikki leaned back into the cushions.

"No... no, she can't do this." Hadley stood with renewed vigor. "I mean, the legal issues alone are enough to-

"I know, I know." Rikki interrupted him. "Trust me, I know."

"Denman will expose your friends as mermaids if you don't agree to let her experiment on you." Hadley repeated blankly. "I just can't believe it."

"I can't believe you'd expect anything different from her." Rikki looked at him. "But don't stress it, we have a sort of plan."

"We?" Hadley turned to look back at her.

"Zane is in town." Rikki exhaled, deciding she might as well tell Hadley all of it. "He's going to help me draw up a contract, set my own terms."

"That's it?" Hadley raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "You're just giving in?"

"What other choice do I have?" Rikki's shoulders shot up to her chin as her voice grew louder. "This is the best shot I have."

"No way." Hadley jumped to his feet, deep in thought as he paced across the room. "You can't agree to work with her." He said firmly. "It'll just end up with you losing your freedom!"

"I know, Hadley." Rikki stood with a sigh, crossing her arms over her chest. He was just echoing the same argument she'd been having in her own head all morning.

"You know what you have to do?" Hadley took her shoulders firmly in his hands, tilting his face towards Rikki's. "You have to tell your Aunt."

"What?" Rikki backed away from him, immediately lowering her voice. "No!" She hissed. "Enough people have found out about me in the last two weeks, I don't need to be making it worse!"

"She's your family, Rikki." Hadley said gently, as if he were speaking to a child. "And, more importantly, she's a lawyer. She can help you more than your ex boyfriend."

"Zane's dad is an incredibly powerful businessman." Rikki argued. "He'll do the best he can."

"I'm not saying he won't." Hadley spoke quietly. "But he's in

Australia. Mags is here, in Florida, and she cares about you. Tell her."

"No." Rikki shook her head vehemently. "Listen, I hardly know her. Sure, she's family, but I have now way of knowing how she'd take that kind of a blow."

"She'd be ok with it!" Hadley shot back. "I mean, I hardly know you either, and I'm fine with it!"

"I'm not telling anyone else." Rikki said firmly. "That's it."

Hadley clenched his jaw, speaking very slowly. "She could help you out. You need to be honest with her."

"And I think you need to leave." Rikki's voice became dangerously quiet. "This is my life, Hadley. I have enough on my plate without you telling me what to do."

"And I think you need to listen to me." Hadley's face didn't even have a trace of a smile. "You're Aunt is a sweet woman. A little vacant, but she loves you. And you need to tell her what's going on."

"No." Rikki pushed open the kitchen door, nodding for Hadley to walk through it.

"All done?" Mags said chipperly, poking her head over the kitchen counter.

"All done." Rikki said seriously, pointedly waiting for Hadley to leave the living room.

Hadley, paused, shoving his hands into his pockets before walking reluctantly back into the kitchen. "Mags." He turned suddenly, smiling brightly at Rikki's Aunt. "Do you have plans for tomorrow evening?"

"Me?" Mags knocked over the glass of orange juice in front of her, sending orange liquid flying across the table. "I, uh, I mean," She flashed Hadley a brilliant smile. "Why no, I don't."

"I would very much like to take you to dinner." Hadley's eyes locked onto Rikki's as he spoke. "I'd just love to discuss your niece."

Rikki's heart sank deep into her chest as she interpreted his meaning.

"I'd love to!" Mags said enthusiastically. "Here, let me write down my number."

"You _wouldn't_." Rikki whispered as Mags made her way to a pen and paper.

"No, I won't." Hadley said quietly back. "If you do it first."

Rikki felt like fire might actually shoot out of her eyeballs as she glared at Hadley. She couldn't believe that, only a few days ago,

she'd been infatuated with him.

Mags hurried over at that moment, thrusting a piece of paper into Hadley's hands. "Call me anytime. Or text." She added.

"I'll do just that." Hadley said charmingly, reaching for his car keys. "I'm sure I'll talk to you soon." He said to both of them, with one last look at Rikki before he walked out the front door.

"Mags." Rikki said quickly the moment the door shut behind him. "You can't go to dinner with Hadley."

"Why not?" Mags rolled her eyes. "Rikki, he's gorgeous. And frankly, he's out of my league. We won't talk too much about you."

Rikki looked at her Aunt, who was happily clearing dishes from the table, a slight blush to her cheeks. She knew she'd never talk her out of going to dinner with Hadley, who was much younger.

"I'm... just going to get ready." Rikki said defeatedly as she stood and headed for the stairs.

Mags was singing to herself happily as Rikki shut her bedroom door.

Rikki sighed as she sat on her bed, ill at the idea of telling yet another person her secret. Then, like a shot, she remembered that tonight was to be a full moon. She lunged for her phone, quickly dialing Lewis's number.

"Hello?" Lewis's familiar voice came through the other line.

"Hey, Lewis." Rikki rubbed her temple as she spoke. "Listen, I'm sorry to bother you but--"

"Tonight is a full moon." Lewis spoke over her. "I was actually just getting ready to call you."

"What should I expect?" Rikki pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. "Will it be any different since I'm in a different hemisphere?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it'll be much more powerful for you than it was here." Lewis said slowly. "But you should know, there's definitely something strange about this full moon."

"What?" Rikki sat up nervously. "What will happen during the full moon tonight?"

"Well, I don't know exactly." Lewis spoke regretfully. "You see, Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune are aligned with the sun tonight, causing some incredibly unusual moon patterns. I begged Cleo to take a peek outside, but she turned me down flat." Lewis sounded more than a little disappointed. "I know this moon is a powerful one, but I can't tell you for sure what to expect."

"Damn." Rikki sighed. "I mean, I'm glad the girls were safe, but..."

"The best advice I can give you is to stay inside." Lewis was

obviously unhappy to only be able to share a small bit of information. "And... Rikki, don't be angry, ok?"

"Why would I be angry?" Rikki said warily.

"I told Cleo and Bella about your trouble with Denman." Lewis said quickly. "I'm sorry, I just felt like they deserved to know, plus..." He swallowed. "Well, Cleo forced me to tell. I'm sorry."

Rikki closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. "Just tell them not to worry." She tried to sound confident. "Tell them I have a plan, and that Zane is here. Everything will be alright."

"Yeah, I'll tell them." Lewis didn't sound particularly confident. "Listen, please be careful tonight. My weather measurements tell me that tonight will be particularly powerful."

"You got it." Rikki said wearily. "Just keep Bella and Cleo calm, everything will be just fine." She clicked her phone shut and let it fall onto her bed. As she looked around at the four full length windows in her room, she realized she had a ton of work to get done before the moon began to rise. She hurried to pack a few things, then dashed down the steps.

She knew where she was headed.

* * *

><p>An hour later, Rikki knocked at Nick's door. She shoved her hands into her pockets as she waited for him to answer. Eventually, the door cracked open.<p>

"Yes?" Nick opened the door a few inches.

"Nick, hey." Rikki spoke quickly. "Listen, tonight's a full moon, and I'm sure you know what that means--"

"It means you're staying at your house all night, yes?" Nick seemed irritated, back to his usual self.

"Well, yeah..." Rikki had hoped Nick would offer his assistance, but his stoic face said otherwise. She swallowed hard, letting her eyes drop down to the ground. "I guess I'll be staying inside tonight."

"Good." Nick nodded. "I'll talk to you tomorrow." He shut the door in her face.

Rikki tried not to get too panicked. She could handle this herself. Heck, she could handle anything by herself. She was Rikki Chadwick, and she could handle anything.

18. The Boys, The Moon, and the Backbone

One trip to the home improvement store later, Rikki arrived back home. She dropped her heavy bags onto the kitchen counter, wiping sweat from her brow.

"Oh good, you're home." Mags breezed into the room, spritzing perfume

on her wrists as she walked. "Listen, I am so sorry, but you're on your own for the night."

"Oh, really?" Rikki tried to sound casual, though she was actually thrilled to hear the news. "How come?"

"I've been called into a conference, the keynote speaker bailed last minute." Mags grinned at her. "Which means there's a room of lawyers waiting to hear me talk!"

"Well, you'll be great." Rikki said encouragingly as she checked her bags for tape. "Where is the conference?"

"Oh, it's only a couple hours away." Mags smoothed her hair in the mirror. "But I'm going to stay at the hotel, I hate driving late at night. Think you'll be alright on your own?"

"Yes!" Rikki said too quickly. "I mean, sure, I'll just be hanging around the house."

"I knew you'd be alright." Mags beamed at her before picking up her car keys. "Call if you need anything, alright?"

"You got it!" Rikki tried not to sound too thrilled to have the house to herself that night. She couldn't believe her luck, this was perfect. "Have fun!" She called as Mags hurried out the front door.

The door shut with a thud as Mags left the house. Rikki immediately ran up the stairs, stopping to drop her heavy bags at the top of the landing. She surveyed her bedroom, mentally groaning as she looked at the four full length windows. Sure, living this close to the ocean was awesome, but there were windows everywhere in this house, and, like most Florida houses, there was no basement.

An hour later, Rikki had managed to successfully cover one long window with thickly taped cardboard stock. She flicked off the bedroom light, wiping sweat from her forehead as she checked the seams of the tapes for cracks. It had been much harder work than she'd expected, holding the cardboard steady while she negotiated the heavy duty tape roll. With two people the job would have been a breeze.

Rikki sighed as she looked around at the other three windows waiting to be covered. At this rate she'd be lucky to get just her room moon-tight, forget about the rest of the house.

Rikki checked the time on her phone's digital display. She still had just over four hours before the moon was to begin rising. Her earlier encounter with Nick was eating at her. Almost against her will, she dialed Nick's number and waited for him to answer.

"What's up?" Nick answered gruffly, without any kind of greeting.

Rikki swallowed, slightly taken aback. "Hey!" She said brightly. "I was wondering if I could borrow you, just for a few minutes. See, I'm blocking out the windows at the house and it's-

"Sorry, Rikki, but I've got a lot going on today." Nick interrupted

her, not sounding the least bit sincere.

"Is something wrong?" Rikki asked bluntly. "We had so much fun last night, and now you just sound... upset."

"I'm fine." Nick said stiffly. "But I don't know why you called me to ask for help, I mean, shouldn't you be on the phone with Mr. Cruz? I'm sure he'd just love to help you."

Unable to keep calm any longer, Rikki snapped. "Why do you keep taking shots at Hadley and me?" Her voice grew louder. "I've told you before, there's nothing going on between us, Nick. And..." She drew in a deep breath. "Even if there was, it's really not any of your business."

"Then why is he giving me such a hard time?" Nick asked angrily.

"What?" Rikki asked, bewildered.

"I had a voicemail waiting for me when I got home last night, and I got a phone call from him this morning." Nick spoke quickly.

"And what did he want?" Rikki forgot about her frustration at Nick as curiosity took over.

"Leave Rikki alone." Nick mocked Hadley's deeper voice. "You're nothing but a bad influence on her. I'm the one she needs to listen to, I'm the one who's always there for her." His voice became increasingly bitter as he echoed Hadley's words. "Don't you see how she's using you? She's only hanging out with you to distract Denman, she'd choose me over you any day." Nick laughed without humor. "I tried to tell him not to worry, he could have you, but he hung up on me. Seriously, Rikki, tell your boyfriend I'm not trying to steal you, ok?"

Rikki didn't know who she was angrier with. Hadley, for sticking his nose into her business with Nick, or Nick for believing what Hadley had told him.

"I mean..." Nick was still talking. "I don't really give a damn if you want to hook up with your teacher. I mean, ew, but whatever. But I don't need more drama in my life."

"Oh, stuff it, Nick." Rikki hung up the phone angrily. She was sick and tired of people making decisions for her. She gave herself a mental kick in the head for being so quick to trust Hadley. Not that she'd had much of a choice, she reminded herself.

Rikki checked the time, then immediately leapt back into motion.

She'd just managed to get the second window taped over when the doorbell rang. Sweaty and dishevelled, Rikki made her way down the steps to her front door.

"You've got to be kidding me." She murmured as she looked through the peephole. She couldn't believe it. Both Zane and Hadley stood on the front steps, matching looks of disdain on their faces as they stood side by side.

Rikki silently counted to three, preparing herself before pulling the door open.

"And how can I help the two of you?" She asked through gritted teeth. "I've really got a lot to do-"

"I know." Zane walked inside without an invitation. "I was just coming by to help you with the full moon, but then _this guy_ showed up-"

"Actually, I was here before him, whoever his is." Hadley looked down his nose at Zane. "He insists he knows you."

Rikki sighed. "Hadley, Zane. Zane, Hadley Cruz."

The boys each shot an appraising look at the other. Both of them were familiar with the other's name.

"The ex boyfriend." Hadley gave Zane a level look.

"The school teacher." Zane matched his gaze.

"Yay, good, now we all know each other." Rikki rolled her eyes at the pair.

"What's this about the full moon?" Hadley frowned as he stepped inside.

"You mean you don't _know_?" Zane said with a cocky smile on his face.

"Maybe we were busy doing... other things." Hadley crossed his arms over his chest.

Zane's eyes flew open as a light bulb went off in his head. "_Him_?" He practically shouted, jerking his thumb at Hadley as he spun to face Rikki. "Seriously? _This_ is the guy?"

"Quiet!" Rikki yelled over the both of them, holding her hands tightly over her ears.

The two hushed immediately, both crossing their arms over their chests as they glared at one another.

"Hadley." Rikki addressed him first. "Ok. The full moon affects me. I'm not to touch water or see the moonlight while it's full. And Zane." She turned to face him, suddenly slightly nervous. "Yes." She admitted. "Hadley is the guy I kissed. But no, there's nothing between us now. Which reminds me..." She turned back to Hadley with a look of fire in her eyes. She spoke to him in a threateningly quiet voice. "Did you or did you not tell Nick that I was using him? Or that you and I are a couple?"

Hadley's face paled as he met Rikki's eyes. "I- uh, well..." He stammered. "I mean, we're _kind of_ a couple..."

"No we aren't!" Rikki lost her cool for the second time that day as Zane tried not to look as pleased as he felt. "Don't you _ever_ take it upon yourself to tell anyone that we are, you hear me? And you!"

She pointed at Zane, whose smile melted immediately. "Quit butting in with Denman. It's my call, got it?"

Wordlessly, Zane nodded.

Rikki glared at the pair of them, feeling considerably lighter after getting all of that off of her chest. "Alright." She exhaled. "I'm still angry, but I need to get back to work."

"Can I help you?" Zane asked meekly.

"Yeah, could we?" Hadley looked hopeful.

"Can you two get along?" Rikki asked, feeling as if she were talking to a pair of six year olds.

Both men nodded solemnly.

Since she really did need the help, especially after wasting so much precious time, Rikki nodded towards the stairs.

Being mutually scolded by Rikki seemed to have united Zane and Hadley to an extent. They made somewhat stilted conversation with one another as they worked. Conversation got less and less awkward as they finished the bedroom and moved down the hall to the windows in the foyer. Zane and Hadley were constantly trying to one up each other, but not to a point where Rikki had to give another lecture.

Before they knew it, the moon had begun to rise in the distance.

'It should be up... now." Zane announced as he checked his watch.

"Well then, that's that." Rikki looked around at the house. They'd managed to get every window covered and taped, at least the ones in the main rooms. The other rooms had been shut tightly and marked with 'Do not enter' signs.

"So what happened then?" Hadley dropped onto the couch, continuing the conversation he and Zane had been having.

"Ha, you should have seen it." Zane laughed at the memory. "She spilled water all over herself, it took three of us to cover for her while she got changed back. We told the other kids that she was allergic to tap water, it was so funny."

Hadley laughed slightly at the story. "I guess people will believe anything, right?"

"Right." Zane nodded. "And then there was this one time Rikki thought she could heat the water of of her so fast she could run through the rain to my house, and _that_ was just a bad-"

"Ok, ok," Rikki dropped onto the loveseat. "Enough of the Rikki stories, k?"

"What are we supposed to do now?" Hadley looked bored. "It's only six, we have all night to kill."

Zane had a glint in his eye. "Her Aunt Mags has an awesome liquor cabinet, I found it when I was looking for the step stool."

"No way." Rikki shook her head firmly. "I am not drinking with the two of you, that's just a recipe for a really bad night."

Zane and Hadley locked eyes.

"So I'll get the glasses?" Zane hopped to his feet.

"I'll pour." Hadley followed him.

Rikki sighed as the pair trotted into the kitchen. She had no intention of joining them as they poured themselves shots from the bar.

Both Zane and Hadley became more and more friendly with one another over the next couple hours, swapping stories and jokes. They were only a year apart, and they actually had quite a bit in common. They were happy as long as the conversation stayed off of Rikki's dating habits.

Rikki didn't mention it to either of them, but she had the oddest feeling in her stomach. It was as if she were being drawn to the front door, through it and out into the night. She fought the urge, though it was more than a little difficult.

"Are you alright?" Zane's eyes were slightly bleary as he looked at Rikki through a sea of whiskey. "You look funny."

"You look funny all the time." Rikki shot back, avoiding his question.

"Buuurrrrrnnnnn." Hadley dissolved into laughter at Rikki's answer.

"Burn? How old are you again?" Zane shot back.

Rikki left them to their banter and casually walked towards the front hall. She just wanted to be close to the moon, though she had no intentions of looking out at it. It calmed her to lean on the cool wood of the door, just knowing that the moon was on the other side, mere inches away.

The boys were shouting loudly from the other room, deep into a friendly argument about who could bench press the most weight. Rikki listened to them for a few moments before leaning her ear against the door.

It was the strangest thing, but Rikki could have sworn she heard someone calling to her from the other side of the door.

"It's just the moon, Rikki." She chided herself, but she couldn't make herself take a step away from the door.

The boys were still arguing in the living room as Rikki reached for the doorknob. She wasn't going to be long, but she had to find the voices, follow them to where they were calling her. What if it was important?

Neither Hadley nor Zane noticed she was gone for a whole hour, then they began to panic.

* * *

><p>Rikki was already flying through the water by the time anyone noticed she was gone. It felt like nothing she'd ever experienced before. The touch of the water was tingly and soothing at the same time as it glided over her skin. She couldn't imagine anything feeling any more calming than this. Why had she waited so long to swim that night? What could have been so important that it had kept her from the sea?<p>

Whatever it was, it was gone from her mind now.

Rikki poured herself through the black water, knowing exactly where she was headed. She felt drawn there, though she'd never been there before. She swam far from the shore, confident in her destination.

Then she saw it. Well, she didn't see it, but she felt it. She was far out into the sea, away from even the sight of land. Rikki couldn't describe it, it just felt right. She dove down beneath the waves, swimming straight for the ocean floor far below her.

It may have been an hour, or a few seconds later when Rikki's fingers curled around the object that she'd known all along was waiting for her. Scooping it into her fingers, she made her way to the surface.

Once she'd reached oxygen she held the object to the moonlight, loving the way the moon beams reflected off of the surface. Carefully, she placed the necklace around her neck, allowing the brilliant blue amulet to fall down onto her chest. This was where it was supposed to be, and for the first time that evening Rikki felt... right. The necklace fell heavy on her chest, comforting her as she swam.

She knew where she was going next.

19. Control, and Losing It

Rikki barely even needed to open her eyes to know where she was going. The moon guided her to exactly where she wanted to go, the absolute only place she had any interest in being. She dried herself easily, ignoring the voices that were calling her name.

Voices that were growing louder and louder.

"Rikki!" Zane panted, grabbing her by the elbow. "You've got to stop, it's the moon." He leaned over, trying to catch his breath.

Rikki smiled at him serenely. "Let go of me." She spoke gently as the amulet around her neck glowed a cool blue color, illuminating her face in the quiet light.

Zane immediately released her, but walked close behind her. "Rikki, you've got to come back home, ok? Right now."

Rikki easily tuned him out, focusing on her destination. She'd be there soon, it was just a little further...

"You found her." Hadley spoke breathlessly as he jogged up behind them. "Why didn't you stop her?" He darted in front of Rikki.

"I _couldn't." _ Zane said in exasperation.

"Rikki, listen to me." Hadley gently placed his hands on Rikki's shoulders, forcing her to halt. "We're going to take you back to the house, ok?"

"Release me." Rikki's words were calm but firm as the necklace glowed.

Hadley's arms dropped to his side as his face screwed up in confusion.

"See?" Zane sounded more than a little bit indignant. "I told you, I couldn't stop her."

"But how?" Hadley was jogging to keep up with Rikki, who had begun walking once again. His arms dangled at his sides, useless, as he ran.

"Block her." Zane called, jumping in front of Rikki. Hadley followed suit, determined to stop her from continuing on.

"Can we pick her up?" He asked Zane.

"I don't know." Zane looked at his hands, unsure.

"You will both remain here." Rikki knew exactly what to say as she gazed at the two men. "You will not try to stop me." With that, she glided past them on her way, without a backward glance. She knew they would obey her, they had to.

The amulet glowed brighter as she moved through the salty sea air, closer and closer to her destination. It was only a few more minutes until she reached it, pausing to look up at the lone window illuminated against the night sky.

There was no car in the driveway, but Rikki wouldn't have stopped even if there was. She opened the front door without knocking, walking immediately up the flight of stairs in front of her.

There was only one door left, a bedroom light shining brightly under the crack between the door and the carpet. Rikki reached for the door knob, savoring the feeling. She was about to see the one person who could comfort her, the one person she wanted to be with.

Nick's face screwed up in an expression of surprise and confusion as she walked right into his bedroom. "Rikki? Wha-" He frowned. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Don't speak." Rikki held one finger gently over Nick's lips, silencing him. His eyes peered curiously into hers as he stood in front of her.

Rikki didn't waste time by speaking. One step took her as close as

she could possibly be, standing only a breath away from him. Slowly, deliberately, savoring every moment, she reached her hands up to take his face gently in them. She loved the way his cheeks felt cool in the palms of her hands. Her eyes pierced his, only separated by a few inches of air.

Rikki's eyes flickered to the moon, shining brightly through Nick's open window. It seemed to encourage her as it shone into the room.

Rikki pulled Nick's face to hers, kissing him hard. She wrapped her arms around his neck, relishing in the feeling of his lips against hers.

It only took a moment for Nick to relax into her, returning her kiss. His tongue slipped easily into her mouth, which she eagerly returned. He tasted perfect, with just a slightly salty taste, like the sea.

Nick twisted slightly, pushing Rikki down onto the bed. She groaned slightly as their kiss broke momentarily, reaching for him as he fell on top of her. Rikki pushed, rolling on top of Nick as the urgency of her kiss increased. Her hands began to explore his body, reaching down as she breathed him in.

After a moment of hesitation, Nick's hands began to do some exploring of their own. Rikki leaned into him as he moved, enjoying every second.

Suddenly, it was as if a switch had flipped in Nick's brain. He pushed Rikki roughly off of him, standing up immediately. His hands raked his hair as he paced back and forth, though he didn't say a word.

Rikki frowned as she stood, confused by his sudden breakaway. "Why do you leave me?" She asked curiously.

Nick said nothing, only holding his hands out to his sides, a clear signal of surrender.

"Listen to me." Rikki approached him slowly, glad that he didn't move away. "This is right." She spoke calmly. "I might be in love with you, Nick Donovan."

Nick's eyes seemed to speak words, though his mouth didn't move. He took a step closer to Rikki, a mixed look of bewilderment and eagerness in his eyes. His arms reached gently around Rikki's waist, his breath landing on her nose.

Rikki's and Nick's eyes locked as they looked at one another, standing as if they were dancing together. The room seemed to melt away as Rikki tilted her head up to Nick's, eager for another kiss like they'd shared earlier. The moon shone on through the window, encouraging Rikki as she moved.

* * *

><p>The sun had risen high into the sky by the time Rikki opened her eyes the next morning. She blinked a few times, unsure of where she was.<p>

The last thing she remembered was talking with Zane and Hadley as they broke into her Aunt's liquor cabinet. Where was she? Rikki looked up at the white ceiling above her, still trying to place where she could be.

Nick groaned sleepily, drawing her attention. He seemed to have fallen asleep in his desk chair, with his forehead leaning on the desk in front of him.

Rikki gasped, one hand flying to her mouth as she lay there, frozen. What was she doing there? Why had she left the home that Hadley and Zane had so carefully prepared for her? Where was she?

She was in Nick's bedroom, Rikki quickly figured out. But why?" Rikki sat up, stretching her arms over her head as Nick awakened.

"Wake up." She whispered, anxious for answers as she sat up.
"Nick!"

"Huh?" Nick shot up like a cannon, looking around the room in confusion. His eyes finally focused in on Rikki. "How are you feeling?" He asked hesitantly as he sat beside her on the bed. He wrapped one arm around her shoulder, gently stroking her skin.

"I'm fine." Rikki frowned up at him. "But what am I doing here?"

Nick's face turned a deep red as he struggled to meet her eye. "You don't remember?"

"It was the moon." Rikki shrugged. "It hasn't hit me that hard in a long time, I don't remember a thing. Did you find me?"

Nick immediately stood, shoving his hands in his pockets. He looked down at his feet as he spoke. "No, ah, actually you found me."

"What?" Rikki's head tilted to one side as she looked at him. "Can you just tell me exactly what happened last night please? Where are Zane and Hadley?"

Nick's expression darkened at the name. "Basically, you showed up at my door all moon struck. You acted pretty goofy for a while, then I tucked you into bed." He looked at her, his face betraying nothing. "And then you woke up."

"That's it?" Rikki couldn't keep the relief out of her voice.

"That's it." Nick said evenly. "Now, no offense, but I've got an appointment."

"Oh, right." Rikki hastily climbed out of the bed. "I'll get out of here. Listen, thanks for letting me crash here last night."

"No worries." Nick's voice was a little strained, but Rikki didn't notice.

"You said I acted goofy..." Rikki paused at the door. "I didn't do

anything I shouldn't have, did I? I mean, do I owe you an apology?"

"No." Nick spoke quickly. "Trust me, you don't owe me an apology."

Rikki gave Nick a long look. She could tell there was something else he wanted to say, but he didn't open his mouth. "Ok." She said simply, turning to leave the room and head back home.

* * *

><p>"Hello?" The house was eerily quiet as Rikki walked inside. Where was everyone? "Zane?" She called, checking the kitchen. "Hadley?"<p>

Seeing no one, Rikki checked upstairs. Empty. Frowning, she dialed Hadley's number.

"Rikki!" He sounded more than a little anxious.

"Where _are_ you guys?" Rikki dropped onto her bed.

"Are you at home?" Hadley didn't answer her question.

"Yes, where are you?" Rikki repeated.

"We'll be there in five minutes, don't go anywhere." Hadley's line cut out.

Rikki shook her head as she closed her own phone. Something sure had him wound up.

Rikki was sitting on the couch downstairs when Hadley and Zane burst through the door.

"Are you alright?"

>"Where did you go?"
"What was that blue necklace?"

>"Why did you sneak out?"<p>

"Guys, guys." Rikki held out her hands. "One question at a time, please. I really don't remember anything, though. What happened?"

The two men exchanged a glance. Hadley was the one who stepped forward to speak.

"You snuck out of the house last night." He explained. "And we found you walking on the beach and then..." His voice trailed off. "Zane? Care to continue?"

Zane didn't look thrilled as he took in a deep breath. "There's something weird about that necklace." He nodded towards Rikki's chest.

For the first time, Rikki noticed a thin gold chain hanging from her neck that held a brilliant blue stone. She reached for it curiously, holding it up to look at it. "Where did this come from?"

"We have no idea." Zane shrugged. "You had it on when we found you

last night."

"What's so weird about it?" Rikki thought it was very pretty, but relatively plain.

"Hadley?" Zane sat on the couch, clearly passing the explanation ball to the teacher.

"It was... glowing." Hadley said finally. "Like, really brightly."

"It must have been the moon." Rikki thought about the blue stones they'd found in the moon pool back home.

"And, Rikki, that's not all." Hadley said timidly. "You, uh, well, we tried to stop you. You know, grab you. But you told us not to."

"Ok..." Rikki shrugged. "What's so odd about that?"

"Well..." Hadley looked to Zane, who nodded. "We couldn't. Touch you, I mean. You told us not to, and it was as if there was something forcing us. We couldn't touch you even if we wanted to."

"_What_?" Rikki sat up, looking at the two of them. "Zane, is he right?"

"Yeah, he is." Zane looked at the floor. "And then..."

"There's _more_?" Rikki groaned.

"You told us to stay there, not to stop you." Zane said quickly. "That's where we were this morning."

"You were outside all night?" Rikki's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline.

"In one damn spot." Hadley said sullenly as he stretched. "We couldn't move our feet."

"And you think I did that?" Rikki asked indignantly.

"Come on, Rikki, of course you did." Zane's voice grew slightly louder. "I mean, I know it was because of the moon, but it was definitely you."

Rikki's mouth dropped open. Sure, she and the other girls had been known to go a little mental during the full moon, but they'd never exhibited any kind of magical powers like these. Her eyes fell to the necklace. "And you think this had something to do with it?"

"It got really bright when you told us to do things." Hadley offered. "Like it knew what you were doing."

"Where did you go?" Zane asked. "Did you come back here?"

"Uh..." Rikki didn't want to admit where she'd actually gone. "Yeah, I guess. It's all a big blur though."

"Damn." Hadley dropped onto the couch, exhausted. "I know you said

the moon made you loopy, but I never expected all of that."

"Sorry." Rikki offered, still trying to get her thinking straight. In spite of everything else going on, she found herself wondering if anything more had happened at Nick's house than what he was letting on.

Rikki's phone rang, startling her. "It's Lewis." She told Zane and Hadley as she stood to take the call. "Lewis, I've got a lot to tell you."

"And I can't wait to hear it." There was a lot of sound from the other line, as if he were somewhere crowded.

"Hi, Rikki!" A familiar female voice shouted.

"Tell Cleo I say hi!" Rikki was struck with a pang of homesickness at the sound of her best friend's voice.

"You can tell her yourself." Lewis said. "Can you meet us at the airport tomorrow, say, six ish?"

20. Reunited

Rikki could hardly sit still the next day during class. She kept checking her watch, glancing anxiously at the clock as the minutes seemed to drag by. She still had to get through three more hours until the final bell, and then she'd be headed to the airport to pick up Lewis and Cleo.

The lunch bell rang, sending Rikki to her feet in a flash as she flew from the room. She walked past the cafeteria and outside, holding her phone tightly against her ear.

"Zane." She spoke quickly as he answered. "Is everything on schedule."

"Yes, just like it was the last time you called." Zane said tiredly. "They're plane is scheduled to arrive at 5:30 or so."

"Great, no delays or anything?" Rikki asked anxiously.

"Rikki." Zane said calmly. "Relax. They'll be here before you know it, ok?"

"Ok." Rikki was too excited, she couldn't contain her impatience. "Thanks, text me if anything comes up."

"Of course I will." Zane promised as he hung up the phone.

Rikki checked for any new text messages before walking back into the school. She caught a flash of Nick turning the corner in front of her. "Nick!" She called, jogging after him.

Nick pretended not to hear her, disappearing around the corner of the hallway.

Rikki paused, her hands on her hips. This wasn't the first time today he'd avoided her. Twice now she'd caught him ducking away from her,

but why?

Rikki was stationed at Nick's locker, waiting for him to arrive there after the next class period. They had Hadley's class next, and she knew he always stopped by here to drop his books off.

Sure enough, it was only a few more moments before she spotted his familiar brown hair headed her way. He seemed to see her waiting for him, because he immediately changed direction, ducking right into Hadley's classroom.

Rikki marched in after him, dropping into the desk beside him. "What's up with you, Nick Donovan?" She spoke in a no-nonsense tone. "Why are you avoiding me?"

Nick's face flushed a deep scarlet as he looked at her. "What makes you think I'm avoiding you?" He said uneasily.

"Oh come on, you've been acting funny ever since..." Rikki's eyes narrowed. "Ever since the full moon." She finished. She still had the feeling that he hadn't told her all that had happened that night. It was as if she were struggling to remember a dream that was just at the edge of her memory.

Nick didn't say a word, but the way he slumped down in the desk chair told Rikki plenty.

"Spit it out." She said quickly, checking the time. They still had six or seven minutes until class would begin. "You've got to tell me, Nick."

"I already told you everything." His eyes didn't quite meet hers. "You showed up at my house, acted all kinds of crazy, then I put you to bed."

"What kind of crazy are we talking?" Rikki wanted to know exactly what had happened.

Now Nick's blush turned almost crimson, standing out against his tanned cheeks. "Well, you were... affectionate."

"Oh..." Suddenly Rikki wished she hadn't asked. "Did we... Did I, kiss you?"

Nick nodded wordlessly, his eyes glued to the table in front of him.

"Nick, I'm so sorry." Rikki felt beyond embarrassed. "It was the moon, it made me act all kinds of weird."

Nick looked as if he wanted to say something more, but he couldn't quite find the nerve. "Don't worry about it." He said finally.

"You're coming over tonight, right?" Rikki was glad to change the subject. "Some of my friends from Australia will be here."

"Really?" Nick seemed interested, though he also seemed relieved to be talking about something else. "Sure, I'll come by. Did Mags make it back alright?"

"Yes..." Rikki said slowly. "How did you know she was gone?"

"Oh, that was me." Nick said sheepishly. "My mom told me about the keynote speaker bailing, I told her she should hire Mags to replace her." He shrugged. "I figured you'd want the house to yourself for the moon."

"Thanks." Rikki meant it. A lot of problems had been avoided by having Mags out of the picture that night. She glanced at Nick out of the corner of her eyes, wishing more than anything that she could remember what had happened on the night of the full moon. She wished she could reach for his hand, give him a quick kiss before class started. But, no. She shook her head, chiding herself. She was lucky he wasn't offended by her behaviour. He didn't have feelings for her like that, and she would just have to accept it.

Rikki didn't know it, but Nick was watching her hand, just inches away from his on the desk, and wishing he could take it in his.

* * *

><p>Denman didn't appear in Hadley's class that day, and eventually the final bell rang. Rikki waited impatiently as Hadley packed up his things, checking her phone as she fidgeted.<p>

"They're still on time." She announced, turning to Nick. "Want a ride to my place?"

"Sure." Nick seemed back to normal, though not quite as sullen as usual.

"Great." Rikki held the door open as the two men walked through it. "We'll get to my place, pick up Zane, and be at the airport by five."

* * *

><p>And that's exactly what they did. Rikki couldn't stop smiling, wondering if she'd ever been this happy in her life as she looked around at her friends. It wasn't just Lewis who had made the flight. Cleo, Bella, and Will were chattering excitedly on the ride back to town. They were slightly cramped into Rikki's vehicle, but no one was complaining.<p>

Hadley had volunteered to drive, much to Rikki's appreciation. Nick sat in the front passenger seat, casting the occasional glance back at the Australians, who had been talking nonstop during the drive.

"Rikki?" It took Hadley a couple attempts, but he managed to get the attention of the rest of the car. "Hey, are we going to your place? Does Mags know your friends are here?"

"Oh... right." Rikki realized she'd never told Mags about her friends' visit.

"I'll just head to my house for now." Hadley said as he turned the steering wheel. "You can get things figured out a little later."

Rikki thanked him, though she silently wondered if he was still planning on outing her secret to her Aunt.

Cleo and Bella had a million questions for Rikki about life in America as they all piled into Hadley's home.

"What's school like?" Bella asked.

"Are American guys, like, really cute?" Cleo gossiped.

"Well, _obviously..._" Bella giggled as she nudged Cleo's shoulder and flashed her eyes up towards Nick, who was sitting awkwardly in front of the TV.

Cleo lowered her voice. "Yeah, when are you going to tell us about your friends? What's their story?"

"Oh..." Rikki leaned in, checking to make sure Hadley was deep in conversation with Lewis and Will before speaking. "Well, that one, Hadley, is one of my teachers."

"He's your _teacher?_" Bella hissed, immediately earning an elbow to the ribs from Rikki.

"Shhh!" Rikki fussed at her friend. "Yes, he's my teacher."

"Wait..." Cleo's brow was knitted tightly. "Hadley... Cruz? The one who invited Denman?"

Bella gasped, immediately shooting Hadley a furious look.

"Oh, stop it." Rikki shook her head. "Yes, he'd the one who invited her here, but he didn't know anything about the history between Denman and us, ok?"

"I don't trust him." Bella frowned as she examined the back of Hadley's head.

"Two seconds ago you were gushing about how cute he was!" Cleo couldn't suppress a giggle.

"Yeah... well..." Bella ran out of steam as she turned back to her girlfriends. "What about that pair of brown eyes?" She nodded towards Nick. "What's his story?"

"Well, that's Nick." Rikki felt an inexplicable sadness as she looked at him. "He's been a big help." She said simply, not wanting to go into too much detail about Nick's past.

"And they _both_ know about you?" Cleo raised her eyebrows.

"About all of us?" Bella added.

"Yes." Rikki nodded. "Hadley caught me, Nick kind of did too."

"Well you couldn't have picked two cuter guys..." Cleo said slyly. "So, which one are you interested in, I mean, now that you and Zane are broken up-"

"Are you girls done gabbing?" Lewis clapped Cleo on the shoulder, giving the other girls a look that plainly said that he was ready to get to business. "Where is this necklace we're all talking about?"

"Oh, right." Rikki quickly pulled the necklace from around her neck and handed it over to Lewis.

"Where did you find it?" Lewis immediately pulled a small magnifying glass from his jeans pocket and hunched over the blue stone.

"I have no idea." Rikki shrugged. "It was around my neck when I woke up on the morning after the full moon."

"You had it on when you bumped into us along the pier." Zane offered. "It glowed brighter when you told us to stay put."

"You had it on when you saw me too." Nick spoke up for the first time since they'd arrived.

Every eye in the room flew to land on Nick.

"Rikki saw you that night?" Hadley asked pointedly.

Zane's arms crossed over his chest. "When were you with him?" He directed the question at Rikki.

Rikki felt like a spotlight had just been directed right at her face. "Let's just talk about the necklace, k?" She said firmly, not wanting to discuss waking up at Nick's house. She ignored Cleo and Bella's raised eyebrows as she looked at Lewis. "What do you think?"

"Well the stone is remarkably similar to the blue stone you girls found at Mako Island." Lewis noted. "But it definitely has some differences. You really don't remember where you found it? Another moon pool or something?"

"No, no idea." Rikki shook her head. "I have no idea where it came from."

"Another moon pool is pretty unlikely though." Nick suggested. "There aren't any caves along the florida coast, the shoreline is too shallow."

"Well... without knowing where it came from..." Lewis turned the gem over in his hands. "It's pretty hard to test it." He examined the metal setting. "But maybe I can research the necklace instead of just the stone."

"You think so?" Rikki avoided Zane's pointed gaze as she leaned over next to Lewis.

"It's the best shot we've got." Lewis pulled out his phone and snapped a careful picture of the blue stoned necklace. "I'll upload it online, see if anyone's come across it before."

"Sounds like a plan." Bella nodded, reaching to pull Will closer to her. She yawned sleepily, trying not to let anyone see.

Rikki sat at attention, realizing she'd forgotten to let Mags know about the visitors. "Hey, let me call Mags." She said as she pulled her phone from her pocket. "I'm sure we have room for everyone, she's got, like, two guest rooms."

"Someone can stay with me." Zane spoke up. "I've got a hotel room just up the beach."

"Yeah, I have plenty of room as well." Hadley added.

"Well, that's a good thing." Rikki said, hanging up the phone. "Because Mags kind of spazzed when I told her just how many friends were in town." Rikki frowned suddenly. "Speaking of which... how _are_ you guys in town?"

"Well, Zane paid for the plane tickets." Cleo started.

"And we all have student visas." Bella finished. "We applied for them the day after you left."

"Fair enough." Rikki nodded. "So who's going where?"

"I can stay with Zane, if that's alright." Lewis spoke up first.

"And, if it's ok, Will and I can stay at Hadley's." Bella volunteered.

"That's absolutely fine by me." Hadley said with a friendly grin.

"And Cleo can stay with me." Rikki spoke. "Mags will let one person crash, she blanched at the others."

"You know..." Nick shoved his hands into his pockets, raising his eyes hesitantly to Zane's. "If you're not comfortable in that hotel room, I'm sure my mother would be glad to have some guests in the house for once. You and Lewis could stay with me."

Rikki's mouth dropped open at the generous offer. She hoped Zane would take him up on it.

"Sounds like a plan to me." Lewis said enthusiastically, standing beside Nick.

"I think I'll stay where I am, thanks." Zane said bitterly, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"Ok then." Rikki clapped her hands enthusiastically, hoping to keep the mood bright. "So Cleo will stay with me, Bella and Will will stay with Hadley, and Lewis will stay with Nick." She nodded happily. "But... what about school tomorrow? Surely you're not all going?"

"Do you want our grades to suffer?" Will asked with false concern.

"Seriously, though." Cleo added in. "We do have to attend, our grades will transfer when we go back home."

"Ok then." Rikki raised her hands in surrender. "We'll all be at school tomorrow. I hope you like unnecessary attention, you'll be getting a lot of it."

As the group departed Rikki tried to keep her thoughts from drifting to Nick... She kept having flashes of memory, like pictures that appeared behind her eyes, telling no story she could follow.

In a flash of memory, she and Nick were entwined on the bed, wrapped so tightly around one another you could barely tell where one ended and the other began.

Rikki shook her head hard, clearing it. It was all a dream, it had to be.

Right?

21. The Best Policy

School was somewhat of a madhouse the next day. Everyone was excited about the arrival of the four new Australian exchange students.

Rikki, Cleo, Bella, Lewis, and Will were all exhausted by the time they made it to Hadley's class at the end of the day. They exchanged nervous looks with one another as they took their seats. Hadley had texted Rikki during lunch to let them know that Denman would be in his class that afternoon.

"I still think you guys should get out of here while you can." Rikki spoke quietly through gritted teeth.

"No way." Cleo replied with a confident smile. "I only wish I'd brought a camera to catch her face when she sees all of us."

"Hey...hey." Lewis spoke up from the end of their row. "I think I found it."

"You found the necklace?" Rikki asked excitedly, hurrying to lean over Lewis's shoulder.

Lewis held the heavy book up to her as Hadley walked into the classroom.

"Hello, class." Hadley said loudly as he dropped his bag into his desk chair as he surveyed the room. "I see we have some new students with us today."

Rikki hurried back to her chair with the book as Hadley had each of her friends introduce themselves to the rest of the class.

"Thank you, Cloe." Hadley said politely.

"It's Cleo, actually." Cleo corrected him, rolling her eyes slightly.

"My apologies, Cleo." Hadley turned to the next student.

Rikki had to stifle a small smile as she watched Hadley and her friends pretend not to know each other. No one else in the room would ever guess that Bella and Will had spent the night in Hadley's guess room last night, or had eggs with him that morning.

Nick burst into the room at that moment. "Sorry I'm late." He muttered as he pushed his way through the row of full desks. He paused at his usual seat near Rikki, then moved on to drop into a seat near the back of the class. He avoided Rikki's eyes, though he gave Will a nod of recognition as he walked past.

Rikki watched him go, sparing only a couple thoughts for him before turning back to look at the dusty book Lewis had handed to her.

"The Siren's Amulet." She read aloud breathlessly. There was a hand drawn picture beside the words. No doubt about it, it was the necklace Rikki had found on the night of the full moon. A paragraph accompanied the drawing.

'Rumors of the existence of a mythical necklace known to have the properties of the Siren have existed for hundreds of years, perhaps dating back as early as 1750.' She read to herself. 'Its origins have been traced back to Ireland, specifically to a ruler who met an early death at the hands of a mysterious siren named Minova.'

'King Mikale of Ireland fell in love with the beautiful siren one day while boating. Though his family and servants begged him to cut off all ties with the water creature, he pledged his undying love to her if she would agree to be his forever. Minova swore her love in return, but only if the king would agree to live with her in the water. The king tried to protest, saying that he would surely drown if he took to the water permanently. However, Minova's song was too strong to resist. That night, King Mikale was chained in his own basement by his closest friends as many young men were drawn to watery graves by the Siren.'

>King Mikale screamed and clawed to be released, but he could not get free from his shackles.
Unbeknownst to the King, his royal sorcerer, Cabo, had set a powerful spell into place. The sorcerer held a pewter chain up to the sky as he called out incantation after incantation. A blue stone appeared as the siren's voice became louder. Then, as the stone glowed a brilliant blue, Minova's voice faded forever. Cabo had trapped her magic in the necklace, trapped where she could no longer be of any danger to the lovesick King.

>Legend has it that King Mikale threw himself into the water the next day, in search of his love.'<p>

Rikki could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she finished reading the paragraph. She quickly wrote Lewis a note and slid it across the desk to him.

'So... the necklace is the soul of some Siren?' She waited as he read it.

Lewis jotted down a quick reply and passed the note back to Rikki.

'Diff source to show you when we get home.' Rikki read. 'No soul, but definitely powers.'

Rikki puzzled over Lewis's handwriting, barely noticing as the classroom door opened. Several seconds passed before Rikki realized that her friends were sitting frozen beside her.

Dr. Denman froze as she stood in front of the class, a look of shock evident on her face. She quickly pulled her lips into a smile as she made eye contact with Rikki. "I see we have a few new students with us today." The smile turned cold as she looked down at Lewis, who swallowed hard.

"New students." Dr. Denman cast a look in Hadley's direction, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes ma'am." Hadley's face remained neutral, betraying nothing.

"I'm very much looking forward to our meeting, Rikki." Denman's eyes were piercing. "In three days, yes?"

"Four." Rikki's voice caught in her throat as she spoke up. She felt unnerved by the expression on Denman's face.

Denman no longer appeared shocked. Now she looked out at the group, a picture of calculating thoughtfulness clear on her face. "Four then." Denman echoed.

Rikki sank down into her desk chair as Denman began speaking to the rest of the class about the research she was conducting. Denman took up the rest of the class period, finally leaving as the ending bell sounded. The group watched her go, letting out a collective sigh of relief as the door swung closed behind her.

"She's even more evil than I remembered." Cleo shivered as she folded her arms across her chest.

"When is Zane going to draw up that contract?" Will spoke up.

"I'm not sure, exactly." What with all of the excitement from her friends' arrival and the full moon, Rikki hadn't given much thought to Denman's ultimatum.

The friends made their way outside the school, chattering about their day as they went.

"Lewis!" Rikki said suddenly, remembering the information he'd found about the necklace. "Spill, where did you find that book?"

"I had it with me already, actually. I just hadn't looked through it yet." Lewis adjusted his heavy backpack.

"And this necklace, you think it has powers? Like a Siren?" Rikki asked excitedly.

"I guess." Lewis sounded unsure. "I dunno, though. It doesn't seem like Hadley and Zane obeyed you because they were enamoured or love struck, more because they were forced to obey your command."

"Still..." Bella said thoughtfully as she skimmed the page. "A Siren's song can make people do all kinds of things against their will, right? What if the stone in the necklace is the Siren's song,

but it's concentrated? You know, all that power crammed into one stone is bound to be pretty intense."

"We really need to know where you found it." Lewis said to Rikki. "You're absolutely sure you have no clue?"

"No idea." Rikki spotted Nick on his way out of the school. "Be right back." She jogged to catch him. "Hey." She caught Nick's elbow, forcing him to stop.

"Oh, hi." Nick said glumly, looking down at his shoes.

"Hey." Rikki felt suddenly awkward as she looked at him. "Um, I was just wondering if maybe you knew where I found that blue necklace? The one from the full moon?"

"I would have told you already if I knew anything." Nick answered matter of factly. "No, I have no idea where you found it that night.

"Right." Rikki deflated slightly, turning to head back towards the group.

"Wait-" Nick stopped her. For just a moment, it looked like he was going to say something, but changed his mind at the last second.

"Yes?" Rikki raised her eyebrows, waiting.

Nick shuffled his feet awkwardly. "I, uh, was just going to say that... you bumped into Hadley and Zane on the shore that night, right?"

Rikki nodded.

Nick shrugged his shoulders. "Sounds like you'd probably been out in the water."

* * *

><p>The group buzzed excitedly as they congregated around Hadley's kitchen table. Each of them had a different idea for the smartest way to search out in the ocean without being seen.<p>

"I still think we should be swimming along the coast." Bella put in. "If there's a moon pool in Florida it's bound to be coastal."

"But I don't think it's possible for there to be a cavern on the Florida coast." Hadley repeated himself. "The water table is too high."

"I say we search out in the open water, along the ocean floor." Cleo spoke up. "Maybe the necklace didn't have anything to do with a moon pool, maybe someone just chucked it out there."

"Do you have a boat?" Rikki turned to Hadley.

"No, but maybe we could rent one?" He raised his shoulders.

"Nick has a boat." Rikki spoke up. "But let's check on renting one

before we ask him to use it." She added quickly.

"No, that's perfect." Will cut in. "I mean, Nick already knows everything about you girls, we won't have to worry about explaining ourselves or-"

"Rikki said to check out the rental places." Zane said firmly as he picked up the thick yellow phone book. "So that's what we're going to do."

"Even on the full moon, it's not very likely for you to have swam too far out." Lewis reasoned. "You were only gone about forty-five minutes before Hadley and Zane found you out on the beach, so we can limit our search to just a couple miles off the shore."

"None of these places rent boats after six in the evening." Zane hung up the phone, clearly disappointed.

Every eye in the room landed, expectantly, on Rikki.

"Fine." She put her hands up in surrender. "I'll call Nick."

Two hours later, just as the sun was beginning to set, the group found themselves congregated on the dock behind Nick's house. Nick walked slowly out to meet them, his hands shoved into his pockets.

"Are you sure there's room for all of us on board?" Hadley asked skeptically as he surveyed the small boat.

"I expect the five of us guys will have more than enough room." Nick said unenthusiastically as he untied the docking anchor. "The girls will only be on board for a bit, once they jump into the water we'll be fine."

Nick was right. The boat was crowded, but they had no trouble maneuvering out of the port.

"Perfect!" Bella called from her perch on the railing. "Just dark enough that people can't see us."

"But light enough for us to search." Cleo finished.

The girls each dove off of the boat after they'd travelled a bit out to sea, each carrying a large underwater flashlight with them for the darkest parts of the sea floor.

Will, Hadley, Zane, Nick, and Lewis exchanged looks with one another before wordlessly agreeing to maintain a comfortable silence with one another.

Rikki flew through the water, waiting for some flash of memory from that night to guide her, but it all just looked like plain old sand. Rikki could not even summon a flicker of a memory of swimming that night. In fact, the only memories she had from the full moon were of Nick.

Rikki shook her head, forcing herself to focus on her search. Those images were probably just dreams, not memories at all. Still... Rikki shivered as she remembered the touch of his skin on hers.

An hour passed before Bella surfaced at the boat's edge. Night had fallen, making the water look an inky black.

"Nothing." Bella said before the guys had a chance to ask. "All I found was ordinary ocean floor."

Cleo and Rikki surfaced about twenty minutes later, both agreeing that the ocean floor had not held any surprises. With some lifting by the boys, they all piled back onto Nick's boat and headed for home.

"Well that was a waste of time." Rikki muttered.

"We'll just have to test it best we can." Lewis tried to sound optimistic. "We'll start tomorrow."

As the boat skimmed over the water, Nick couldn't keep his eyes from flickering over to the passenger seat, where Rikki had ridden with him to the carnival only a few days ago. He smiled briefly as he remembered the night, snapping himself out of it a moment later. He had no way of knowing that Rikki was lost in her own happy memories from that Friday night with him, remembering how easy it had been to spend time with him.

There was a general feeling of disappointment as they all climbed out onto the dock. They'd taken both Hadley and Rikki's vehicles over to Nick's place, and Hadley and Will began carrying equipment back over to them.

"Here." Rikki tossed her keys to Lewis. "You guys go on ahead, I'm right behind you."

"But how will you get home?" Zane's eyes narrowed in Nick's direction as he took a step forward. "I'll wait with you."

"I can drive her home." Nick said, a bit too quickly.

"There you go." Rikki crossed her arms over her chest, daring Zane to push the issue.

Zane slunk out to the car, followed by a whispering Cleo and Bella. Rikki waved them on, waiting until the cars had pulled away from the curb to turn back to face Nick.

"I've got to talk to you." She said finally, looking up at him with pleading eyes. "I have to know what happened between us on the night of the full moon, Nick. I keep having these memories... and I know you told me a little bit, but I need to know everything."

"Come with me." Nick took her hand in his and gently led her into the house. He closed the door to his room tightly, gesturing for Rikki to have a seat on the bed. He waited until she was comfortably seated before speaking. "I really didn't want to have to tell you about the other night." He began.

"Oh man." Rikki rubbed her temples. "How bad _was_ it?"

"No," Nick said quickly, moving a bit closer to her. "It wasn't bad at all."

Rikki held up a hand, stopping him. "Just tell me everything. Don't leave anything out."

Nick took in a deep breath, and then he began to talk. He told Rikki about how she'd shown up in his bedroom that night, and how she'd kissed him. And then he told her about how they'd done a little _more_ than kiss.

"What?" Rikki exploded as he recounted the way they'd touched each other on the bed.

Nick's face was flushed a deep purple from embarrassment as he met her fiery gaze.

Rikki was humiliated. "Why didn't you tell me to stop it?" She paced angrily back and forth. "I mean, did you just think that it was _alright_ to take advantage of me because I was moon struck? In what world is it ok to-"

"I did." Nick said quietly.

Rikki froze, breathing hard, as she turned to face him. "You what?"

Nick stood, walking to her slowly. "I tried to talk to you, but you told me not to speak."

"And you couldn't say anything after that." Rikki whispered, realization hitting her like a brick. She'd been wearing the necklace. Nick had had to obey everything she'd told him to do. She'd told him to stop talking, he'd been silenced. She must have told him not to pull away from her, or told him not to stop kissing her, or something to make him continue.

"I did try to stop you at one point," Nick spoke. "But you-"

"No, you can stop right there." Rikki resumed her pacing. It was all too clear now. He'd tried to stop her but she'd forced him to continue. How many times had Nick told Rikki that he wasn't interested in her? And here she'd forced herself onto him against his will. Rikki felt like she might throw up. Her heart pounded in her chest as feelings of guilt replaced her embarrassment. "Just answer one more question." Rikki locked eyes with Nick. "You've told me about some of the... other... things we did besides kiss." She swallowed hard. "But did we... you know, did we..."

Nick's eyes shot open. "No." He shook his head firmly. "I pushed you away, and you fell asleep in my bed." He shuffled his feet. "I, uh, redressed you and then I tucked you in. I slept at my desk, don't worry."

"No, you don't have to worry." Rikki's voice felt thick. "I sincerely apologise, Nick. You don't have to worry about anything like that ever happening again, I promise."

"No, Rikki." Nick walked to her, reaching for her waist. "I _want_ _for_ that to-"

"Thanks for all your help." Rikki said coolly, pulling away from him.

"I won't be needing your help anymore."

"What?" Nick's face fell. "What are you saying?"

It was painful for Rikki to say the words, but she knew it was the best thing she could do. Nick didn't want her, she was only doing him a favor. "I'm saying that I appreciate all that you've done for me, but I don't need you. I have my friends and Hadley, and I'm sure between all of us we can handle Denman."

Hurt flared in Nick's eyes. "So you're just done with me? Just like that?"

"Yes." Rikki said simply, unable to meet his gaze. She was sure if he looked her dead in the eye he would know she was lying. "I'll see you at school, Nick." She started out the door and down the steps.

"You told me you loved me." Nick shouted after her. "Does that mean a thing to you?"

Rikki froze on the steps as a fresh wave of humiliation washed over her. Then, without a word, she continued down and out of the house.

Nick slammed his bedroom door closed, making the door frame shake from the impact.

22. Out

Rikki fumed with anger as she walked home. She couldn't believe her behaviour from the night of the full moon. Sure, she and the other girls had all lost control due to the moonlight. In fact, Rikki realized, she'd kissed Zane for the first time while under the influence of a full moon.

Rikki's stomach flipped over uncomfortably. More than anything, she was angry that she'd ruined her friendship with Nick. He'd come to be quite a good friend to her, and she really enjoyed his company. He'd been so easy to talk to, so easy to spend time with. She didn't think she'd be able to look him in the eye any more.

All the better. Rikki nodded as she walked. Life was complicated enough right now, she didn't need to be dragging anyone else into her mess.

Still... Nick's words echoed in Rikki's head, refusing to stop looping around. What had he meant?

'_You told me you loved me. Does that mean a thing to you?_'

Rikki tilted her head thoughtfully to one side as she puzzled over the words. He'd sounded angry as he'd shouted them at her. But why? Why would he be upset about something she'd said under the full moon?

He was angry that she'd told him she didn't need him, Rikki realized. He was probably just trying to upset her.

"Hey you." A car pulled up beside her. "I knew he wouldn't give you a

ride. Hop in." Zane reached over to swing open the passenger door.

Rikki climbed into the car with a sigh. "He would have, I just didn't ask him to." She said tiredly as she clicked her seat belt into place.

"He's bad news, Rikki." Zane said firmly, steering the car towards Rikki's house. "I know you think he's trustworthy, but I guarantee he'd sell you out to Denman in a heartbeat."

"No he wouldn't." Rikki really didn't feel like explaining about Kaitlyn. "He won't be around much any more, don't worry."

"Good." Zane said, satisfied. "Oh, my father faxed this over today. He had his best lawyers draw it up. Don't worry." Zane added quickly. "He left the personal terms blank, then added in the details after his law firm had finished. They all just thought it was in regards to some marine biology work. They don't know your secret. My Dad was pretty surprised though." Zane gave a small laugh as Rikki flipped through the thick contract.

"Thanks a lot, Zane." Rikki felt relieved as she read through the terms. Everything seemed straight forward. Rikki flipped the page, pausing to read the next bit. She reread it. "Zane... this can't be right." She spoke slowly.

"Ok, before you say anything, don't freak out." Zane said hastily. "We had to make the terms equal, the lawyers wouldn't draw up a one sided contract. They said they had to give Denman some leverage too."

"But _Zane_." Rikki's brow furrowed as she continued reading. "This gives Denman complete control of _all_ public appearances. She could drag me all over the news channels if she wanted to."

"And you'll get paid well for it!" Zane offered.

"Above named party is obliged to follow the terms of said contract for a period of no shorter than..." Rikki's eyes flew open. "_Six years_?"

"I know it's a long time." Zane said quietly. "But it'll be over before you know it, and by then you'll have made a ton of money."

"I don't care about the money, Zane." Rikki said shrilly. "I knew we were in for some major changes, but I thought this contract was at least going to let me be in charge of my public appearances."

Zane sighed. "I know, but I really think you'll see this is all for the best. I had to give up a few of your rights in exchange for better rates in terms of your compensation."

"So you're telling me..." Rikki processed his words. "That you let them draw up a contract giving up my freedom for the next _six_ years... because you wanted me to make a lot of money?"

"Well, uh..." Zane cleared his throat. "I just figured you'd want to be comfortable when all of this is over."

"I can't believe it." Rikki shook her head. "Hadley was right."

"Excuse me?" Zane said indignantly. "This is an excellent contract, Rikki."

"I need to talk to Mags." Rikki said aloud, wheels turning in her head. "I need to tell her what's going on. She cares about me, she'll come up with terms better than these."

"What do you mean, Hadley was right?" Zane clearly hadn't gotten over that part of the conversation.

Rikki felt nerves rising in her chest as they pulled into her driveway. Both Mags's and Hadley's cars were parked in the driveway already. Rikki took in a deep breath as they parked, preparing herself for what was sure to be a difficult conversation. She was going to tell Mags her secret.

"Thanks, Zane." She said bitterly as she climbed up the front steps. "But you can throw that contract in the ocean."

"Hey." Zane said angrily, catching Rikki by the elbow before she could walk inside. "I had to pull a lot of strings to get this drawn up. You got a great deal, a little appreciation would be nice."

"I believe that you honestly think this is a good deal for me." Rikki jabbed her finger at the stack of paper. "But you and I have different definitions of importance, Zane." She pushed the front door open and marched inside.

"Rikki!" Cleo ran to her from the kitchen, catching her shoulders. "I was literally just getting ready to call you."

"You need to get Hadley out of there." Lewis panted as he jogged over to them.

"Out of where?" Rikki frowned.

"I don't know exactly what he's doing." Lewis shook his head. "He said something about giving you the chance to do it first. Then he asked Mags to come with him into the living room. He said he had something important to talk to her about."

"He wouldn't tell us exactly what it was." Bella said nervously. "But, Rikki, I think he's going to tell her something about us. He said it was for your own good."

"No." Rikki's heart sank as she looked at the closed living room door. "He can't." She'd forgotten all about Hadley's threat to tell Mags. Without waiting to knock, she pushed open the living room door and ran inside.

She was too late, and she knew it. Hadley looked up at her guiltily from his seat on the couch. He was holding Mags's hand in his, and she was sitting frozen beside him, her face stricken.

"Mags?" Rikki sat down gingerly beside her. "Are you ok?"

It was several seconds before Mags's eyes focused on Rikki. Suddenly

she burst out into laughter, almost doubling over. "Rikki." She chuckled, wiping a tear from her eye. "Mr. Cruz has just told me the most ridiculous story." Mags stood, her smile seeming more than a little forced. "Are tacos alright for dinner tonight?" She pushed through the living room door and walked into the kitchen, past a wide eyed Cleo and Bella.

"Did you tell her?" Rikki hissed at Hadley.

"Yeah." Hadley stood. "Listen, Rikki-"

Rikki hurried after Mags, not pausing to listen to what Hadley had to say. Her friends looked at her questioningly as she walked into the hall. "I need to talk to Mags." Rikki whispered. "Can you..."

"You got it." Lewis nodded to Cleo, Bella, and Will. "We'll give you some space." The four of them filed out of the house, followed reluctantly by Zane.

Hadley resumed his seat on the couch as Rikki stood nervously in the kitchen door. Mags was chopping up tomatoes, bobbing her head in time to the radio.

"Mags, can I talk to you?" Rikki spoke up.

"Sure, honey." Mags said flippantly. "Would you mind handing me that cutting board?"

Rikki picked up the white board from the counter, turning it over in her hands. "I need to talk to you about what Hadley told you."

"Rikki!" Mags scolded her. "Mr. Cruz is your teacher, don't call him by his first name."

"He's more than just my teacher." Rikki began slowly. "He's my friend, he's been helping me out a lot lately."

Mags's shoulders stiffened slightly. "Rikki, if he's tried anything inappropriate with you..."

"That's not what I meant." Rikki avoided her question. "Mags, he was telling you the truth."

Mags slowly turned to look at Rikki, still clutching a spatula in her hand. "How do you know what he told me?"

"Because he told me that he would tell you if I didn't." Rikki's nerves shook her confidence. This was the first time she'd ever come right out and told someone her secret. "Mags, he was telling you the truth."

Mags gave a breezy laugh as she took the cutting board out of Rikki's hands. "What are you two up to? Are you just looking for a laugh?" Her tone didn't sound nearly as cheery as it had a moment ago.

Hadley stepped inside, leaning against the door frame. He shoved his hands into his pockets as he surveyed the room. Rikki held up one hand, shaking her head as he opened his mouth to speak.

"It's true." Rikki said nervously. "I really am a... a mermaid."

The silence in the kitchen was tangible as Mags froze, knife poised above a red tomato. Her eyes darted from Rikki to Hadley, as if she were waiting for them to shout 'Got ya!'

"Mermaids don't exist." Mags said eventually, her eyes still switching from Rikki's face to Hadley's.

"They do." Rikki spoke carefully. "I can show you."

Before she could talk herself out of it, Rikki turned on the faucet and shoved her arm beneath the flowing water. She quickly sat on the floor and waited the allotted ten seconds.

The blood drained from Mags's face as she watched Rikki's legs become a long golden fin. The knife clattered to the floor as she gasped, cupping her mouth with her hands. Rikki dried herself off a moment later, glad that Mags hadn't run out of the room.

It took almost an hour to tell Mags the whole story, but Rikki told her everything. How she'd become a mermaid, all about their first encounter with Linda Denman, all about the full moon and how it affected her.

Hadley spoke up from time to time, sometimes patting Rikki's shoulder reassuringly.

Rikki finished up the never-ending monologue by telling Mags all about Denman, and the confrontation they'd had with her here in Florida.

Mags didn't say a word, though she sank into a kitchen chair as Rikki spoke. Her face was an unreadable mixture of shock and fright. Rikki didn't feel relieved after getting the story off her chest. Instead, she felt vulnerable.

"And that's everything." Rikki finished lamely, twisting her fingers so hard they hurt.

No one made a sound as Rikki and Hadley watched Mags, waiting for her reaction. It was a solid minute before Mags moved, standing so abruptly she made Rikki jump.

"I need a moment." Mag's voice was hoarse, scratchy. Her eyes remained glued to the table in front of her, not looking at Rikki or Hadley. Shakily, she stood and made her way to the kitchen door. She pushed through it without another word, disappearing into the hall. Rikki heard her bedroom door close a moment later.

"Well that went well." Hadley rubbed his temples as he sat in a kitchen chair.

"That went well?" Rikki turned on him. "You told her! Without me!"

"Well..." Hadley looked down, guilt flushing over his face. "I mean, in my defence, I did tell you I was going to..."

"I was on my way home to tell her, Hadley, it wasn't your secret to tell." Rikki paced angrily, keeping an eye on the hall. She was beginning to worry about Mags. Her phone rang in her pocket.

"Hey Lewis." Rikki answered tiredly.

"Rikki!" There was a ton of commotion from the other end of the phone, as if Lewis were standing in the middle of a party. "Listen, I think we figured out the necklace!"

"Really?" Rikki straightened, a glimmer of hope in her chest.

"Yes. Shhh! Guys!" Lewis addressed the rest of the group. "And Rikki, this necklace may be just what we need to fix things with Denman."

23. Discoveries, Mermaid Style

"Lewis says he's figured out the necklace." Rikki's voice was somewhat monotone as she set her phone on the counter.

"Well that's great, right?" Hadley couldn't seem to decide where to be excited or hesitant as he examined Rikki's expression.

"Yeah... it's great." Rikki's voice trailed off as she craned her neck to look down the hallway at Mags's room. She hadn't reappeared. Rikki didn't know if she should check on her or leave her alone to think over things. Rikki decided to give her a few more minutes alone, mermaids were an awful lot to deal with.

"They're at my house, I gave Lewis a key." Hadley seemed to be talking just to fill the empty silence in the room.

"That was nice of you, Hadley." Rikki said wearily as she rubbed her temples. "Listen..." She managed to look Hadley dead in the eye. "We've got to talk. You were way out of line today."

"I know." Hadley shuffled his feet sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I just thought if I told her and you saw how supportive she was..." His voice trailed off as he looked at Rikki's expression.

"That's if she's supportive at all." Rikki hissed angrily. "And that's a huge if!"

"I'm going to be ok with this, Rikki." A quiet voice came from the door frame. Mags stepped carefully into the room, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Both Rikki and Hadley jumped at her entrance, standing straighter as Mags walked into the small kitchen.

"Mags..." Rikki approached her, unsure of the expression on her Aunt's face.

"Stop." Mags took a step backwards, her hands extended.

Rikki obeyed, trying not to let the hurt she felt show on her face.

"I don't believe in mermaids." Mags said firmly, her face locked in a grim expression. "I don't believe in ghosts, or magic, or..." She gestured towards Rikki, apparently at a loss for words. She sank into a kitchen chair, edging slightly away from Hadley.

Rikki sat opposite her, waiting for her to finish her thought.

Mags swallowed hard before speaking again. "You're my niece." She said finally. "I may not have been able to visit as much as I wanted to, but you're my niece and I love you."

"And I love you too." Rikki realized that this was the first time she'd said those words. Guilt knotted up tightly in her chest.

"And that's why I will help you with this Denman situation." Mags spoke calmly. "Because I love you, no matter what you are. But Rikki-" She took a small step closer. "I don't want to hear anything more about this, do you understand? After this, I want to go right back to pretending everything is normal. That's the way I want to cope with all of this."

Rikki nodded hesitantly, unsure of just how everything would be normal after this.

"Alright." Mags forced the most professional look she could muster onto her face. "So let's talk about the terms of this contract. It's between you and a Linda Denman, correct?"

* * *

><p>Rikki's stomach flipped over uncomfortably as she flicked through the thick stack of pages that fell from the printer. Mags had carefully explained each point, but Rikki's pulse quickened at the thought of confronting Denman with it.<p>

To Rikki's surprise, Hadley and Mags seemed to be somewhat hitting it off. At the moment, they were heatedly discussing what type of legal ramifications they felt Denman should face if she violated the terms of the contract.

It was two hours later before Rikki stepped outside of the house, a newly printed contract clutched tightly in her hands. Mags wasn't comfortable with the subject matter and her face had flushed several times, but they'd managed to create an incredibly binding contract that included all of the rights Rikki deemed necessary.

Rikki's phone rang for the sixth time. "Yes, Lewis, I'm coming." She said exasperatedly, shoving the phone into her pocket. "Mags, listen, thank you." She hoped her Aunt knew how much she meant the words. "I have to run over to Hadley's house for a bit, but I'll be home later on tonight, ok? I'd really love to talk."

"To Hadley's house?" Mags pointed at Hadley with her pen. "To... his house?"

"Yeah." Hadley spoke up. "I've been letting a few of Rikki's friends from Australia stay there."

"This just gets weirder and weirder." Mags shook her head as she looked back down at the pages in front of her. "You can go ahead,

Rikki. I think I've got all the information I need." Her eyes slid over to Hadley. "You can go too, Mr. Frasier."

"Are you sure?" Hadley stood. "I'd be glad to stay and help you finish up."

"I think you've helped enough for today." Mags said tersely, avoiding his gaze.

"Well... ok then." Rikki lingered for a moment, waiting to see if Mags would say anything else, or at least look at him.

Mags shuffled the papers in front of her, looking to her computer screen for a moment before resuming typing.

"After you?" Hadley held the door open for Rikki, waiting for her to walk through before following her outside.

Mags let out a long exhale as she watched the pair walk outside. Her hands were slightly shaking as she removed them from the keyboard and tucked them into her lap. This was an _awful_ lot to take in...

* * *

><p>"Rikki! Finally!" Zane said excitedly as Rikki stepped through Hadley's front door. "You'll never believe this."<p>

"Rikki!" Lewis appeared, panting breathlessly. "You've got to check this out."

Zane shoved Rikki into the living room, followed closely by Hadley. Rikki fell onto the couch, looking around wide-eyed at the scene in front of her.

Cleo and Bella were standing next to each other, holding their blue stone crystals out in front of them. Bella was wearing the blue amulet Rikki had found on the night of the full moon, and they were both grinning uncontrollably.

"Lewis!" Cleo squealed. "Your turn!"

Lewis sighed slightly as he walked to the middle of the living room.

"Wait til you see, it's pretty cool." Zane winked before disappearing into the kitchen.

"See what?" Rikki frowned, but was immediately hushed by Bella.

"Shhh!" Bella hissed. "Just watch this!"

Rikki obeyed, leaning back into the couch to watch their demonstration.

Smiling at one another, Cleo and Bella reached out to touch their blue crystals against the other's. Instantly, the room was flooded with a familiar blue light. Rikki recognised it from when they were dealing with the water tentacle.

Rikki found her eyes drawn to the blue crystals. In fact, it took some effort to force her eyes to look at anything else. After a moment, she realized that the blue amulet around Bella's neck was glowing a distinctive cool blue color.

"Lewis." Bella spoke, her eyes glassy and mischievous. "Hop on one foot."

Instantly, Lewis began hopping up and down on his left foot, reaching towards the wall for balance. "Not too long, ok?" He pleaded. "I'm still tired from all of our experiments."

"Stop." Bella spoke, a smirk appearing on her face. "Lewis, I want you to kiss Hadley."

"Aw, Bella..." Lewis screwed up his face, though his feet walked him towards the teacher, who was seated next to Rikki on the couch.

Rikki turned to look at Hadley, expecting him to stand or at least move away from Lewis, but he sat still. His eyes were glazed, as if he were hypnotized.

Lewis's face screwed up, but, as if he were resisting it, he leaned in and kissed Hadley on the cheek. Immediately he jumped to stand, shaking his head and wiping his mouth. "Gross." He muttered.

Instantly, Bella and Clew pulled the blue gems apart, dissolving into giggles as they did so.

"I can't believe he did it." Bella gasped for air as she laughed.

"He had to!" Cleo was also giggling as she gave Lewis a firm kiss on the lips. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Lewis muttered.

"Did it work?" Zane asked as he walked back into the room.

"It did!" Bella laughed. "Just like earlier."

"So..." Lewis sat beside Rikki on the couch, trying to maintain a professional tone. "We've found out that when a mermaid is wearing the necklace during a full moon, or a full moon simulation..." He nodded toward the blue crystal necklaces. "They can make the humans in the vicinity do anything they want."

"Really?" Rikki stood, reaching for the necklace. Bella handed it to her. "So that's why Zane and Hadley had to do what I said on the night of the full moon?"

"Right." Zane nodded. "And it stops working when the moon is down. Or, when the crystals aren't touching."

"Wow..." Rikki breathed, looking over at Hadley, who was shaking his head. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Hadley shook his head hard, trying to focus his eyes. "I

just feel kind of weird."

"Yeah, humans react kind of funny sometimes when the stone is doing it's thing." Zane crossed his arms over his chest, a somewhat smug look on his face.

"That's why you stayed in the other room." Hadley's voice grew louder. "You could have warned me."

"Nah, why miss out on the fun?" Zane couldn't stop the smile from playing across his face.

"Ok, both of you cut it out." Rikki said firmly, cutting Hadley off as he began to argue. "So you're telling me that this necklace gives us control of humans?" She turned to Lewis.

"Only on a full moon." Lewis clarified. "And the compulsion seems to wear off after the full moon ends, though we can't really test that until the next full moon."

"And you think we can use this to help get rid of Denman... how?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest as she looked to her friends.

"C'mon, Rikki, it's obvious." Cleo said enthusiastically. "We wait til the next full moon, you put on the necklace, and you order Denman to forget all about us. The end." She smiled happily at her friends.

"Until the moon sets." Rikki paced the floor. "Then it all wears off, doesn't it? And she remembers everything about us?"

"Oh." Cleo stopped, suddenly looking disappointed. "Right."

The room settled into silence as they each pondered the best way to use the necklace.

"If it wears off as soon as the moon sets..." Cleo paced the floor as well. "Then Denman will remember everything as soon as the sun comes up."

"What if we tell her to forget everything _forever_?" Bella suggested. "Wouldn't she have to obey that command even after the moon sets?"

"We wouldn't be able to test anything like that until the next full moon." Lewis reasoned. "I can't be sure whether that would work or not."

Rikki stifled a yawn as the group continued to debate what would work and what wouldn't.

"Well, we know it could help." Zane said finally. "I mean, surely we can use this to our advantage somehow."

"Yeah, I'm sure we can." Rikki stood from the couch. "Listen, you've all done amazing work today, but I'm exhausted. Can we continue the testing tomorrow?"

"Sure." Cleo stood and walked over to Rikki. "We've got time to do

more testing, let's just shelve it for the time being."

"Thank you." Rikki shot Cleo a grateful look before turning to the rest of the group. "So we'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sounds like a plan." Lewis said wearily. "I'll head over to Nick's. It's weird, I haven't heard from him today."

Rikki ignored Lewis's comment as she looked to the rest of the group.

"Seriously guys, thank you." She faked a smile. "I've just been through a lot today. Tomorrow we'll make some serious decisions about how to use all of this against Denman."

She walked out the door a moment later, even though she was sure Hadley and Zane would have liked to say one thing more to her before she left. She didn't want to listen to either of them at the moment, she just wanted to go home. Today had been much more stressful than she'd been anticipating.

Nick was on Rikki's mind as she and Cleo approached Rikki's home. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't quite shake him. As much as she tried to shake it, she wanted to talk to him.

"You go on." Rikki nodded towards the front door. "I'll be inside in just a second."

"You sure?" Cleo raised her eyebrows, then walked through the door.

Rikki waited for the door to close before dialing Nick's cell. It rang a few times, then clicked through to voicemail. He still wasn't talking to her, it seemed. Rikki clicked her phone closed, glumly trudging her way up the front steps of Mags's home. She pushed the front door open, hoping Mags would still be downstairs so they could talk.

"Sorry, excuse me." Nick looked up, surprised, as Rikki walked through the front door. "I was just leaving."

Rikki's eyes flickered into the living room, where Mags was seated, looking solemnly at her hands.

"What are you doing here?" Rikki couldn't help but ask as Nick stood in the doorway, getting ready to leave.

"I was dropping off some case studies for my mom." Nick spoke quietly, stepping in slightly towards Rikki so that Mags couldn't hear them. "And, I must say, I'm disappointed in you. Telling your Aunt such a huge secret and then bailing? Lame move, Rik." And with that, he walked out the door.

24. Contracts and Closed Doors

For a moment Rikki couldn't say a word, she was too shocked. "Hey!" She called angrily, stalking after Nick and catching him by the arm. "How dare _ you_ be disappointed in _me_?"

Nick raised one eyebrow as he crossed his arms over his chest. "You told your Aunt you're a mermaid and then left her all alone. She's not handling it well, Rikki. Don't you think you should have stayed to make sure she was alright?"

"She's fine!" Rikki hissed.

"Oh really?" Nick took a slow step closer, causing Rikki to retreat. "When I knocked on the door I could hear her inside, crying. I've been inside doing nothing but comforting her for the last half hour."

"Yeah?" Rikki felt anger bubbling up in her chest. "Well at least I told my Aunt, now I don't have to keep it a secret anymore. You don't even have the nerve to tell your mom about your sister."

"You didn't tell Mags, Hadley did." Nick's voice had become so quiet it almost frightened Rikki. "And how dare you talk about my sister." He took one step forward as Rikki took one big step back. "You don't know anything, Rikki." Nick shoved his hands in his pockets and turned to walk away.

All the rage she had felt seemed to drain away from Rikki's chest as she watched him begin to disappear down the street. "You were comforting her?" She called after him.

"That's right." Nick's voice sounded somewhat more tired. "Now go inside and talk to your Aunt." He turned his back on her and continued down the road.

"Nick!" Rikki shouted, waiting for him to turn back towards her before speaking. "Thank you."

"Sure." Nick nodded his head once before continuing his walk towards his home.

It was a few moments before Rikki could talk herself into opening her front door. It looked like Cleo had gone straight to bed, but Rikki could hear the sounds of tapping on a keyboard as she walked down the hall.

"Mags?" Rikki knocked lightly on Mag's bedroom door.

Her Aunt cleared her throat before speaking. "Come in, Rikki."

Mags was still in her clothes, though she was sitting in her bed wrapped up in a blanket. Her laptop was open in front of her, though she pushed it shut as Rikki stepped inside the room. Wordlessly, she patted the mattress beside her, waiting for Rikki to take a seat before speaking.

"Is..." Mags swallowed. "Is there any way to reverse it?"

"Reverse..." Rikki frowned.

"Reverse the whole mermaid thing. Make you normal again." Mags didn't quite meet Rikki's eye as she spoke.

"Oh." Rikki couldn't hide her surprise at the question. "No. Well, not for a long time."

"That's ok." Mags sounded like she'd been expecting that answer. "We can figure things out. Maybe move somewhere dryer, where it doesn't rain as often. You won't be forced to change, you can just live like an ordinary every day human-"

"What? Mags?" Rikki stood, shocked by Mag's words. "I don't want to move."

"Of course you do." Mags robotically opened her laptop and began typing. "I'm applying to law firms in Arizona now."

"Arizona?" Alarm flashed across Rikki's eyes. "Mags, I love being a mermaid. I love living here, I don't want anything to change."

"I have to protect you, Rikki." Mags continued typing, speaking in a quiet voice.

"What happened to you not wanting to talk about this subject?" Rikki's voice grew slightly louder. "Just a few hours ago you said you wanted to go back to pretending things were normal."

"That was before I talked to your friend Nick." Mags answered.

"Nick." Rikki's heart sank.

"Yes, Nick." Mags looked up from her keyboard briefly.

"You can't listen to him, Mags, he's angry with me." Rikki cradled her forehead in her hand, rubbing her temples.

"Really?" Mags sounded surprised. "I would have picked another word." She let out a long sigh before continuing to talk. "He kept telling me not to worry, that you were the same person you'd always been. He told me not to panic too much, that it was a gift." Mags adjusted the blanket around her shoulders. "He sounded completely ridiculous."

Rikki didn't know what to feel. Hearing Nick's kind words made her want to run to him, but what did Mag's mean, he sounded ridiculous?"

"I mean, what if you can't have children?" Mags seemed almost to be talking to herself. "Who knows if you can have a child when you're changing like that every day? And what if you're discovered? What if the contract with Denman doesn't hold? How will you find someone to marry while you're hiding this kind of a secret?"

Rikki walked to the bedroom door as Mags continued to mutter to herself. She paused, one hand on the doorknob, and turned back to look at her Aunt. "I'm really sorry we had to tell you." She said quietly before walking down the hall to her own room.

Finally alone, Rikki sat on her bed and pulled her knees up to her chin. She wanted things to go back to normal, to settle down. This was too much excitement for her liking. Now Mags was searching for a cure, Nick was upset with her, and Denman was waiting to make her

life hell. And only a couple more days until they were due to meet again.

Rikki clenched her jaw as she pulled the final draft of the contract from her bag. "Everyone is busy making decisions for me." She said to herself. "I can handle this myself."

* * *

><p>Rikki and Cleo waited outside the front entrance of the high school for the rest of their group to arrive. Rikki made an effort to keep up conversation, but she was more than a little distracted.<p>

Finally, Hadley's car pulled into the lot. Will and Bella hopped out, then waved for Hadley to pull away to park in the faculty lot. They were still talking excitedly about the amulet and what they could use it for.

"I'm just saying," Will was speaking excitedly. "If you're wearing the amulet and you tell her to forget _forever_, won't that carry over even when the moon sets?"

Lewis jogged up a second later. "I've got a whole list of tests to run after school today." He waved a manilla folder above his head.

"I, uh, I'll be a little late." Rikki spoke up. "I have to stay after to take a make up exam."

The day passed too quickly. After the final bell had rung, Rikki wished her friends goodbye and good luck. They left in a group, leaving her alone with Hadley.

"I know what you're doing." He spoke, startling Rikki.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Rikki tried her best to sound innocent.

"You're going to meet Denman." Hadley leaned on his desk, his hands shoved into his pockets. "You know, she does still tell me things."

"Don't tell anyone." Rikki stood up straight, pleading with her eyes. "I need to do this."

"Rikki..." Hadley took a few steps towards her. "Just wait for the rest of us. What's the rush?"

"The rush?" Rikki laughed bitterly. "The rush is that I can't live this way anymore. I can't handle the stress. Even if she's just going to turn me over to a news crew, I have to go ahead and do it. I can't handle the suspense any longer. Don't try to stop me."

"I won't." Hadley held both hands up in surrender. "Listen, I know I really screwed up with the whole Mags situation. From now on you make the decisions."

"Good." Rikki nodded, relieved. "Wish me luck."

Hadley watched as she disappeared through the door. "Good luck."

* * *

><p>"I was very surprised when you said you wanted to move up the date of our meeting." Denman said coolly as she paced the length of her office.<p>

"Yes, well, I figured it was silly to put things off any longer. Rikki kept her face free of emotion as she slid the stack of pages across the desk towards Denman. "We've drawn up a contract. It's in your best interest to sign it, it'll make things much simpler."

"Let's see." Denman dropped into her seat and perused the typed papers in front of her. "Ah." She raised both eyebrows as she read.

Rikki crossed her legs, trying her best to look calm and unconcerned.

"You've made some pretty serious demands." Denman said with a small smile.

"Yes I have." Rikki said firmly. "I'll work with you willingly. You'll have my full compliance if you agree to these terms."

"You're offering me the ability to conduct as many scientific experiments on you as I see fit." Denman read from the page. "You give me full permission to publish every one of my results, and to take as many pictures as I like."

"Except-" Rikki said loudly, standing.

"Except I'm not allowed to show your face or reveal your name." Denman flipped the folder closed.

"And you're not allowed to reveal any name of any of my friends who might know my secret." Rikki said firmly. "Am I clear?"

"Oh, perfectly." Denman smiled bigger. "I'll be glad to sign. Shall we go to the bank to have it witnessed?"

Rikki examined Denman closely, but didn't see any sign of foul play. "Sure." She answered.

* * *

><p>"Where have you been?" Zane pulled Hadley's front door open so that Rikki could walk inside. "We've already been working for a whole hour."<p>

"Sorry, got caught up after school." Rikki apologised as she set down her book bag.

"No worries, come in here." Lewis called from the living room.

"We've got good news and bad news." Cleo announced as Rikki took a seat on the couch.

"Good news first please." Rikki couldn't help but laugh as her friends crowded around her.

"Ok." Bella smiled brightly. "Well, we've been testing the necklace like crazy."

"It's definitely going to help." Cleo spoke up. "I mean, we don't think anything you command will last forever, even with the amulet, but if you got her on tape saying she is making everything up..."

"Then you can send that tape out and discredit her." Lewis said excitedly.

"That's a great idea." Rikki said through a tight lipped smile. "I'll definitely get right on that. What is the bad news?"

A silence swept the room as her friends exchanged glances with one another.

"Rikki..." It was Cleo, her best friend, who stepped forward. "I'm afraid we aren't going to be able to stay as long as we thought."

"Oh." Whatever Rikki had been expecting her to say, it wasn't that. "When do you have to leave?"

"Well, I get to stay." Zane stepped forward. "At least, I can stay, if you want me to."

"The rest of us have to be on a plane home by the end of the week." Will spoke up. "I'm sorry, Rikki."

"I still think it has something to do with Denman." Bella grumbled.

"We don't know that, Bella." Cleo hushed her.

"We know that our student visas were disputed by an educator who doesn't feel we're here to be educated." Bella shot back. "I'd put money on it that Denman called us in."

"We're so sorry." Cleo spoke a little louder. "We want to stay, but-"

"No, don't you worry." Rikki looked each of her friends dead in the eye. "It's better for you all to get back home." Secretly, Rikki was relieved. With her friends back home in Australia, Denman would have less of a chance to exploit them.

"Here." Bella held out her hand to Rikki. Enclosed in her fist was the blue amulet. "You need to keep this safe, ok? We've written everything down for you."

Rikki felt a sharp pang of guilt in her chest. Her friends had worked so hard at testing the amulet, and she'd gone and met with Denman without telling them. Still, it was for their own good.

"Alright." Lewis said in a business-like tone. "Rikki, listen up."

This is what we've learned about the amulet so far..."

"It all starts with moonlight." Cleo interrupted excitedly. "Even if the moon is out, the amulet won't work unless it is actually touched by moonlight."

"Ok." Rikki nodded.

"Right." Lewis nodded. "But once the moonlight touches the amulet, it glows blue."

"That's when you need to be careful." Will rubbed his shoulder as he stood beside Bella.

"When the amulet glows, humans must obey whatever command they are given by a mermaid." Bella said with a giggle.

"Yeah, any command." Zane massaged a bruise on his knee. "Even if they tell you to crawl around on all fours for an hour..."

"Let it go." Cleo rolled her eyes at Zane's grumbling.

"Physical commands are more easily performed than mental tasks." Lewis continued. "For example, if you told Zane to sit in that chair, he would obey immediately, then wait for his next command. However, if you were to tell Zane to, say, forget his middle name, he may have trouble recalling it for a short while, but eventually his mind will heal itself and restore his memories."

"It wears off." Rikki spoke, her brow knit together.

"Well, the physical commands wear off the moment the moon goes down." Zane moved closer to the group.

"And it would seem the mental ones do as well." Lewis agreed.

"So we can't use this against Denman." Rikki crossed her arms tightly over her chest as she paced the floor. "We can't command her to forget about us or anything like that."

"You can always try it," Lewis stifled a yawn. "But odds are her memories will all return eventually. A safer bet would be to command her to sign something."

The group settled into a thoughtful silence, each doing their best to come up with the simplest solution.

The front door opened, startling all of them before they recognized Hadley. He set three large pizza boxes on the kitchen counter and turned to face the group. "So what did I miss?"

25. Wearing Out and Working in

**To all of you wonderful and loyal readers, thank you so much for bearing with me. I've moved, been in and out of the hospital, and been busy with all kinds of things that have kept me too busy to update. But I make you a promise! This story will be wrapped up by the end of this month! We've got a long way to go, lots of chapters, so my goal is to get a couple up a week. Thank you so much for your

patience, I truly hope this story is worth the wait!**

* * *

><p>The next few days passed by far too quickly for Rikki. She and her friends had agreed to have as much fun as possible during their remaining days in Florida, and that's exactly what they'd done. They spent nights laughing and watching movies, and the tension in the group eased considerably. Several times, Bella and Cleo tried to convince Rikki to talk to them about Denman, but Rikki refused. She insisted they not worry. She was handling Denman on her own.<p>

Before anyone could be completely ready, the day arrived when her friends were to fly back to Australia. They walked together into the school, oddly silent for the first time in days. The school day seemed to be going by far too quickly already. The bell rang, sending the group hurrying to their first class.

"Is Rikki Chadwick in this class?" A small freshman girl poked her head into the classroom.

"Yes." The teacher walked to the door, taking the note the girl held out. Wordlessly, she brought it to Rikki and placed it on her desk.

'Meet me at 4pm at the university practice pool. Plan on staying at least an hour, lots of data to collect. Dr. Denman.'

Rikki sighed as she crumpled the note into a ball and shoved it into her pocket. She would barely have enough time to get to the airport and back before she had to be at the pool.

"Hey!" Cleo whispered. "What was that about?" She nodded towards the desk.

"Nothing." Rikki whispered back. "Just from Mags." She felt guilty as she told the lie, but she couldn't bring herself to make Cleo's day even worse by telling her it was from Denman.

It would be fine. Rikki could see her friends to the airport as soon as school ended. The airport was only a few minutes away, she shouldn't have any trouble making it on time for her first meeting with Denman. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she questioned her decision once again. She still felt she'd made the right choice.

The ride to the airport was quiet. No one quite knew what to say as the car pulled to a stop in front of the terminal.

"I... I can't thank you guys enough for coming." Rikki managed to speak. "You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"Don't be silly." Bella pulled Rikki in for a bone crushing hug.

"We're going to miss you so much!" Cleo through her arms around both of them, squeezing them tightly.

Lewis stepped in next. "I'm sorry we didn't find more answers." He

ran his hand through his blonde hair as he shook his head.

"No, you guys figured out more than I ever would have." Rikki hushed him. "And I'm going to continue running experiments."

"Just make sure you have someone to work with." Lewis reminded her. "You'll want someone with you to help you test it, and to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"I'll help her." Hadley stepped forward.

Rikki's stomach clenched uncomfortably as the boys talked about the blue stone. She couldn't help but think about how terribly she missed Nick, and how much she wished he was there. They hadn't spoken a word to one another in several days. Nick took care to avoid her in class, only speaking to her when he absolutely had to. Once, Rikki had tried to start a conversation with him, but she'd been shut down before she could get three words out.

Cleo seemed to be reading Rikki's mind. "Hey." She pulled on Rikki's elbow. "Tell Nick we said goodbye, alright?"

"Sure thing." Rikki nodded.

Cleo started to walk away, but paused and turned back to Rikki. "You know." She spoke quietly. "Lewis and I overthought our relationship." She swallowed before continuing. "We were worried that dating would ruin our friendship. But here we are, years later, and I've never been so happy."

"That's great." Rikki said dryly.

"Listen." Cleo's eyes darted over towards Hadley and Lewis. "All I'm saying is that I can see the way Nick looks at you. I don't know exactly what's been making him keep away, but I hope it doesn't last forever."

"Thank you." Rikki held Cleo tightly for a bit longer before stepping back to wave as Bella, Will, Lewis, and Cleo walked down the ramp towards the boarding area.

Zane let out a long exhale as he watched the rest of the group disappear inside. "I wish they could have stayed." He muttered.

"So do I." Rikki nodded, trying to retain her composure.

"Mind if we take a moment?" Zane shot Hadley a pointed look.

Hadley raised his eyebrows before reluctantly moving away. Rikki turned to Zane, a curious look on her face.

"I'm going back as well." Zane said quickly. "Tomorrow."

"Oh." Rikki couldn't hide her surprise. "I didn't know."

"Neither did I, not until today." Zane shoved his hands in his pockets. "Listen, Rikki, you know I still love you."

Rikki looked down at her feet, not wanting to have this conversation. "Zane..."

Zane held up one hand, silencing her. "We've been through a lot together. A _lot_." He lowered his voice. "I've kept your secret. And I'll never tell it." He looked deeply into Rikki's eyes, seeming as if he were holding back exactly what he wanted to say. "I need to go back home. And so do you." His eyes flickered in Hadley's direction. "You've made... friends here."

"Zane, you don't need to go." Rikki tried to speak but Zane hushed her once again.

"I need to get back home, back to work. I hope that you'll come back soon as well. I'll be there waiting for you." Zane took one of Rikki's hands tightly in his. "My flight leaves tomorrow morning. Once you get done with all of this madness maybe we'll be able to be together again."

"Maybe." Rikki tried to feel the same spark of excitement she had once felt every time she looked at Zane, but it was oddly missing. Instead, she pulled him in for a tight hug.

"All done here?" Hadley walked back towards them, frowning as he looked at the expression on Rikki's face.

"Yup, all done." Rikki took a step back and turned to walk out towards the parking lot.

* * *

><p>Rikki took a deep breath as she opened the door at the practice pool. She didn't know exactly what to expect, and she was more than a little nervous. Still, she felt this was the right way to handle things. The contract was iron clad. If Denman violated it she would be in legal trouble for the next several years.<p>

"Right on time." Denman's cool voice echoed off the walls as she walked towards Rikki.

"You said four oclock." Rikki crossed her arms over her chest.

"And here you are." Denman pulled a clipboard from her case and made a quick note. "All right." She nodded towards the water. "Stand over there."

"What are you doing first?" Rikki couldn't help but ask.

"Rikki, today we'll be monitoring your change from human to mermaid." Denman spoke into a digital recorder. "I want you to sit right on the edge, with your legs out straight in front of you."

Rikki obeyed, keeping her eyes peeled for a camera or other type of video recording device, but she didn't see anything other than the research equipment.

"Alright." Denman crouched beside her, setting up a large piece of equipment right over Rikki's knees. "This will take a high resolution image as you change. She unceremoniously splashed pool water onto Rikki's legs, peering through the lens in the machine as Rikki's tail appeared ten seconds later. She took several long seconds to write in her notebook before looking up. "Now dry." She commanded.

Rikki rolled her eyes as she did what Denman said. A few seconds later she was once again sitting with her two legs extended in front of her. "Now what?" She asked.

"Again." Was all Denman answered.

* * *

><p>Rikki was exhausted by the time she left the training pool. Denman had done nothing but record her changing, over and over and over again. Rikki felt drained, as if she'd just finished running a marathon. She hadn't known she could be this exhausted simply from using her powers, but it looked like it took a lot out of her body.<p>

Rikki unlocked her front door, breathing in the heavenly aroma of whatever Mags was cooking for dinner. She found her Aunt in the kitchen stirring a pot of something on the stove.

"What's for dinner?" Rikki dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

Mags jumped, clearly unaware that Rikki had entered the room until that moment. "Rikki!" Her voice sounded a bit strained. "Sorry, I didn't hear you come in." She took a step towards the table, but stopped quick. "I'm making chicken noodle soup." Suddenly her face twisted into an odd expression. "I forget, is that something you can eat?"

Rikki sighed. Mags had been acting weird ever since Hadley had told her Rikki's secret. She was constantly asking questions, and she spent most of her free time either out of the house or shut up in her room. Try as she might, Rikki couldn't convince her that she was still the same old Rikki Chadwick she'd always been, but Mags never seemed to hear her. Life at the house was strained, with Mags sometimes pretending everything was absolutely fine, and sometimes treating Rikki as if she had an infectious disease. It looked like today was an infectious disease day.

"Of course I can eat soup." Rikki said with a smile, though her heart felt like it was sinking. "I can do everything you can do."

"Except the dishes." Mags turned back to the stove. "Or shower. Or, oh my, Rikki, how will you ever dye your hair? Or tie dye a shirt? Or-"

"That's a funny story, actually." Rikki forced herself to sound chipper. "You know, my friend Emma tried to dye her hair once, it was the weirdest thing, everytime she changed-"

"Another mermaid." Mags cut her off.

"Yes, but-" Rikki realized she shouldn't have brought up the others.

"You know, I think I'll get some work done before bed." Mags looked distracted as she edged out of the room, pausing by the door. "Huge case tomorrow." And with that, she was gone.

Rikki listened to her Aunt's footsteps as she disappeared up the stairs.

* * *

><p>The next day came far too quickly for Rikki. She laid in bed for a long time before finally pulling herself to her feet. As had become the norm, Mags was already long gone by the time Rikki made it downstairs. It felt like her first day of school in America all over again. No friends, no one to talk to.<p>

A note was delivered to her as soon as she walked into her first class of the day. She was to meet with Denman again today, this time right after school.

The day crawled by, and it seemed ages later when Rikki finally sat down in her last class of the day, Hadley's. Hadley had been acting slightly strange ever since her friends had arrived, but Rikki just chalked that up to Zane's presence in the group.

Zane.

Rikki's eye's darted up to the clock. Zane's plane had left an hour ago, pointed back towards Australia. Rikki waited to feel pain, or loneliness at his leaving, but the feelings never came.

* * *

><p>"Enjoy your free time while you have it." Denman remarked as she made a note in her folder. "I'm scheduled to have a meeting with the head marine researcher of this university in two days. After that the secret will officially be out."<p>

"But not my name." Rikki said quickly.

"Or your face, I know." Denman raised an eyebrow as she continued writing. "I do know our terms, Rikki."

"Just making sure." Rikki swam in a circle, keeping an eye on the doctor. Two days. She hadn't realized Denman would be taking her information public quite so quickly, she'd thought she would have more time to test the blue stone and form a more solid plan of action. A new idea crossed her mind. "You know..." Rikki said slowly, carefully watching Denman's expression. "The full moon will be here in a week or so."

Denman visibly stiffened at Rikki's words. She knew that the full moon had a certain effect on the mermaids, though she'd never been told exactly what it was. "Will it?" She tried to sound casual.

"Yes." Rikki could tell she'd gotten her attention. "I have a proposition for you."

"I'm listening." Denman set her pencil down and gave Rikki her full attention.

"Don't go to your meeting with the marine biologist. Not yet." Rikki said calmly. "Wait until after the full moon. I can show you things you've never seen before, you'll have even more material to show

around."

Denman shook her head. "Sorry, Chadwick. You're not talking me out of anything."

"And I'm not trying to!" Rikki rested on her elbows at the edge of the pool. "You can still meet with him, just wait until after the full moon."

"And what exactly will you be showing me? " Denman crossed her arms over her chest. "You'll have to convince me it's worth the wait."

"Oh, it is." Rikki nodded, closing her eyes. "But I can only show you on the full moon."

Denman's eyes narrowed as she examined Rikki. The only sound in the room was the lapping of the pool water on the edge of the concrete. It seemed to be an eternity before she finally opened her mouth. "Alright. But it better be worth it."

Rikki swallowed her argument in her throat. She'd been more than ready to have to argue, to really beg Denman to wait til the moon, but she'd agreed relatively easily. In fact, Rikki frowned slightly, this all seemed to be far too easy. She watched as Denman packed her bag, tucking her notes into the front folder and zipping it up tightly.

The drive home was long and slow. Rikki couldn't seem to rid herself of the feeling of being completely alone. More than ever, she missed her friends. She'd gotten so used to seeing them everyday, it was a fresh new pain to miss them again. Rikki picked up her phone, trying to convince herself to call Hadley. Try as she might, she couldn't make herself dial the number.

* * *

><p>It was late, around ten o'clock, when the doorbell rang. Rikki had already put on her pajamas and was getting ready to climb into bed when she heard the chime.<p>

"Who could that be?" She asked herself. Mags hadn't come home yet, maybe she'd forgotten her key?

Rikki pulled the door open, surprised to see the familiar face waiting on the other side. "What are you doing here?"

Nick didn't look happy to see her, he just held out the box he was holding. "Case studies." Was all he answered.

"Thanks." Rikki grabbed the box from him, not in the mood to deal with his moodiness. "Is that all?" Her voice cracked slightly, against her will, as she said the words.

"That's all." Nick's eyes seemed to linger on Rikki's for a moment.

Rikki didn't wait for him to say anything else. Seeing him was just too painful a reminder of how much she missed him. She slammed the door closed, dropping the box of case studies on the floor beside

it.

Completely against her will, Rikki felt herself become overwhelmed with loneliness. She missed Nick, almost more than she missed her friends. She missed his no-nonsense attitude and his dry humor. She missed being able to talk to him about the things going on in her life. Before she could stop herself, her hand flew to the doorknob and she pulled the front door open, calling "Nick!"

She needn't have shouted. Nick stood right on the other side of the door, mere inches away from her. He had been leaning against the doorframe, but he now stood straight when he saw the look on Rikki's face. "Come here." He said quietly.

Rikki fell into his arms, grateful to be held by someone so strong. Within minutes they were up in her room. Nick listened patiently as Rikki unloaded, telling him everything about the last few weeks that he may have missed. She told him all about her contract with Denman, and how she hadn't told her friends about it. She told him more about what Lewis had discovered about the blue stone and how she might be able to use it. Then, haltingly, she told him about Zane leaving, and how she no longer felt like she was in love with him.

Rikki took a deep breath, willing herself to say the words she was thinking. "I miss you." She said finally, not looking into Nick's eyes as she spoke. "I know you don't want to be friends anymore... but I really miss you, Nick."

Nick's expression was thoughtful as he listened to her. "You're right. I don't want to be your friend anymore."

Rikki closed her eyes, taking a deep breath as she listened. Then, with a deep breath and a mental pep talk, she forced a wry smile onto her face. "Thanks for listening and letting me vent. It's getting late, you should really be going." She pulled open her bedroom door and stood aside, clearly waiting for him to walk through it.

"Oh." Nick stood, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I mean, I think you misunderstand what I'm trying to say, I'm not good at this kind of thing."

"Nick..." Rikki gestured for him to leave, then dropped back onto the bed.

"Ok. Here it goes." Nick paused awkwardly in the doorway, turning back to face Rikki, his expression unreadable. "Listen, feel free to say no, I mean, I won't be offended or anything if you don't want to, but if I don't ask I'll hate myself..."

"Yes?" Rikki tilted her head to one side as she stood and took one step closer to Nick.

Nick took in a long breath. "Would you, I mean, do you think you'd consider... I don't know, going out with me sometime?" His eyes glued themselves to the floor as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

Rikki's heart leapt into her chest, but she forced her face to remain calm. "Go out?" She asked casually as she moved a little closer.

"On a date." Nick nodded, his face dead serious as his eyes pierced hers.

Rikki took one more small step towards him, letting a smile play at the corners of her mouth. "I think that's something I could handle." She answered lightly, hoping she appeared cool and collected.

"Good." Nick exhaled forcefully as he scuffed his feet on the carpet.

"But let's wait until after the full moon, ok?" Rikki heard herself jabbering. "I don't want to have anything else on my mind, especially not Linda Denman." She tried to hush herself, but her nervous energy was spilling out of her in the form of idle chatter. "Not that I'm not excited," She continued. "I mean, I'm not over excited or anythi-"

Nick wore an oddly focused expression as he listened to her speak. Suddenly, without a word, he reached out and took Rikki's face in both of his warm hands. His skin felt slightly rough on her smooth face. Before she could respond, Nick pulled her close to him and pressed his lips onto hers. He released her a second later, looking deep into her eyes. "I don't just want to be your friend anymore."

Rikki smiled as he kissed her again. This time she completely understood.

26. Rain, Go Away

Rikki woke up the next morning with a smile on her face. Despite losing her friends to Australia, and all of her nervousness about Denman, she had one thing to look forward to when she got up.

Nick.

Rikki couldn't help but relive the night before, and feel the warm glow as she remembered it. Nick had kissed her hard, then had headed on his way. Part of Rikki had wanted to stop him, to ask him to stay, but she'd watched him go. Now, as she looked into her full length mirror, Rikki felt an odd thrill run through her as she thought about seeing him at school.

After a momentary bout of indecision as she picked out her clothes, Rikki bounced down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her heart sank slightly as she looked around the empty, sterile, room. Mags had clearly left early for work yet again. Rikki sighed as she grabbed an apple. There had to be something she could do to win back Maggie's trust.

Shaking her head, Rikki grabbed her book bag and keys and pulled open the front door.

"Oh!" She jumped, startled.

"Sorry." Nick said quickly, jumping to his feet and brushing off his pants. "I was just on my way to school, I thought I'd swing by and

wait for you." He shoved his hands into his pockets, looking at the ground sheepishly as he did so.

"That was nice of you." Rikki felt a surprising pang of shyness, a feeling she was completely unfamiliar with. The last time a guy had made her feel shy she much have been no older than eight or nine. Even more surprising, she found that she wasn't unhappy with the shivers running up and down her spine. She didn't quite know what to say next.

"Should... we go to school?" Nick raised his eyebrows, clearly waiting for Rikki to say something.

"Of course." Rikki held up her keys. "Hop in, I'll drive."

* * *

><p>The sky was beginning to cloud over by the time Rikki and Nick pulled into the student parking lot.<p>

"Think we'll make it in before the rain falls?" Rikki peered out the window warily, eyeing one particularly dark and looming cloud overhead. It threatened to open up any minute.

Nick gave the sky a long look. "Yeah, but I wouldn't take your time."

Rikki didn't need to be told anything else. She quickly threw her back over her shoulder and walked briskly towards the school entrance. Nick walked beside her, jogging slightly to keep up.

Rikki was pleasantly surprised as Nick's warm hand reached for her own. His fingers entwined in her own as they walked hand in hand. It felt comfortable, as if they'd been walking like this forever. Hesitantly, Rikki let her head lean against Nick's shoulder as they walked down the hallway, garnering a few looks of interest from fellow students.

"So I'll see you in Hadley's class?" Nick paused outside Rikki's first period of the day.

"You bet." Rikki stood close, tilting her face up to look at Nick's.

"Great." Nick cleared his throat, dropped Rikki's hand, and headed down the hall towards Math.

Rikki watched him go, a slight frown on her face. She'd kind of expected a goodbye kiss, or something along those lines. It was odd having a new boyfriend. Well... was he really her boyfriend? He had only asked if he could take her out sometime, he hadn't said anything about being in an official relationship, had he?

Suddenly, someone grabbed Rikki's shoulder and turned her around. "I almost forgot." Nick said with a grin as he pulled Rikki in for a quick kiss.

Rikki couldn't hide her smile as the bell rang, giving him one last peck before he hurried away towards his classroom.

* * *

><p>The rain was coming down hard as Rikki and Nick sat down in Hadley's class.<p>

"I didn't know it was supposed to monsoon today." Rikki peered out the window as she took her seat.

Nick dropped into the desk next to her. "I hope it stops soon. Do you meet with Denman today?"

"Yes." Rikki had forgotten for a moment that she was due to be at the practice pool by 4. "But I can't get there if the rain doesn't stop."

"Rikki?" Hadley gestured for her to come up to his desk. "Hey, um, Linda is waiting for you in the hall, she wants to have a word with you." His eyes fell back onto his lesson plan.

Rikki stepped outside the classroom, where Denman was standing waiting for her. "Yes?" Rikki shut the classroom door tightly behind her.

"Yes, it looks like we'll be conducting our meeting here today." Denman tapped her clipboard with one manicured nail.

"Here?" Rikki frowned. "But there is no pool here at the school."

"I'm aware of that fact." Denman said dryly. "But as you can see," She nodded toward the front hall window. "It's raining terribly outside, I hardly see how you'll be arriving at the practice pool."

"Then we reschedule." Rikki knew it was a long shot. "We'll meet on Monday."

"No, we'll be meeting as scheduled." Denman didn't even seem concerned. "And we'll be using the workout room adjoining the gymnasium."

"But-" Rikki began to disagree.

"No buts." Denman shook her head. "I'll see you down there at 3:15."

"3:15?" Rikki shook her head. "We weren't scheduled to meet until 4?"

"Plans have changed." Denman said curtly before turning on her heel and marching away.

Rikki let out a sigh of frustration as she walked back into Hadley's room. He was just finishing up instructions for their latest project.

"Partner up!" Hadley called to the class.

Nick moved his desk closer to Rikki's. "We're stitching buttons. It's massively boring."

"What are you doing after school today?" Rikki quickly threaded the needle.

"Nothing." Nick watched as she easily sewed the button onto the shirt collar.

"I need to you come with me." Rikki spoke quietly. "Denman wants to meet here, in the school."

"Instead of the practice pool?" Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Rain." Rikki said simply. "She wants to meet in the workout room. I want you to come with me, help me make sure no one sees us."

"Do you think Denman would be ok with me being there?" Nick attempted to thread his needle for the third time.

"I don't care much." Rikki cut the thread. "She wants to meet here, where there are all kinds of people around. I think I have the right to have someone there to keep a look out."

"What about Hadley?" Nick finally succeeded in threading the needle. "Wouldn't it make more sense for him to be there?"

"Denman doesn't know that Hadley knows about me." Rikki spoke quietly. "We can't have Hadley there."

"Are you positive she doesn't know?" Nick seemed skeptical. "I mean, it seems kind of unlikely that, after all she's putting you through, she hasn't said a word to him about you, doesn't it?"

"Hadley would have told us." Rikki said firmly.

"Ok." Nick shrugged. "If you trust him, I trust him."

* * *

><p>"What I'm saying, Rikki," Denman spoke angrily. "Is that observers to our sessions are not welcome."

"He stays or I leave." Rikki crossed her arms tightly over her chest. "I should be allowed to have a lookout, just in case someone comes down the hall. Our contract states that I have to attend these sessions, but it doesn't say anything about changing the location from the practice pool." Rikki hoped she looked as confident as she sounded.

Denman pursed her lips tightly, obviously debating whether or not to pursue the issue. Evidently, she landed on the side of allowing it without any further disagreement. "Fine." She said sharply. "But he waits outside the door."

"Ok." Rikki shot a quick look around the room. There was only one door on the far end of the hall, no one could get to the gymnasium without going through it, Nick should be fine stationed there. She turned to look at him.

Nick was leaning in the doorway, his hands shoved into his pockets

and a death glare aimed directly at Denman. "That's fine." He stepped outside, pausing to look back at Rikki and Denman. "I'll be just on the other side of this door." His eyes lingered on Denman before he pulled the door tightly closed behind him.

Rikki watched as he disappeared, glad to know that he would only be a few feet away.

"Over here, now." Denman directed, pointing to an odd metal machine. "Your legs go through here."

Rikki frowned as she slid her legs into the uncomfortable piece of machinery. Four clamps slid down and tightened around her thighs and shins, shooting a pang of pain all the way up her back. "It it supposed to be this tight?" Rikki squirmed. "What is this supposed to do?"

"This little piece will be very instrumental in my research." Denman tightened knobs and made a few notes. "It is a super high powered microscopic camera. It will take the clearest pictures known to man. I'll actually be able to observe the cells as they change."

"_More_ pictures?" Rikki tried not to move, as movement hurt incredibly badly.

"Well, Rikki, you see you've given me no other choice." Denman muttered. "Since I can't show your face I'll need to have the most convincing data possible." She hit a button on the side of the machinery, sending a cascade of water down onto Rikki's legs. " I'll want to begin with some speed and movement tests tomorrow, but today is a picture day."

Rikki had to bite her lip to keep from shouting as she transformed. The metal of the machine dug painfully into her skin, causing her eyes to water.

"I'll be bringing in an assistant next week to help me monitor your speed tests." Denman said casually.

"What?" Rikki managed to speak, despite the pain she was in.

"It's nothing to be concerned about." Denman nodded towards the door. "It's not like it's anything he doesn't already know about."

"Oh." Rikki exhaled. Denman was bringing in Nick? Had he agreed to participate?

The time passed slowly. For the third time, Denman adjusted the large metal contraption over her legs. Rikki winced as the clamps dug sharply into her shins.

"You didn't mention that your tests would be this painful." Rikki took in a sharp breath as it tightened even further.

"All in the name of science." Denman didn't seem concerned as she made a note on her clipboard.

"It's starting to seem like all I am is a guinea pig." Rikki grumbled.

"Because that's exactly what you are, dear." Denman almost cooed the words as she poured more water into the top of the machine.

* * *

><p>It was an hour later before Denman finally announced that she was done with the machine. Rikki practically ran to the door, relieved to find Nick waiting on the other side.<p>

"Sorry that took so long." Rikki apologized as she pulled Nick in for a hug. "Ow, sorry."

"Are you hurt?" Nick stepped back, examining Rikki with a concerned look on his face.

"I'm fine." Rikki shook her head. "Let's get out of here." She started down the hall and up the stairs towards the main hall.

"We can't go too far just yet." Nick walked beside her. "It's still pouring out there."

"Ah." Rikki opened her locker, pulling out her back pack. "Well darn."

"Come on." Nick took Rikki's hand in his. "Follow me."

Sure enough, it was still pouring outside, and showed no signs of letting up anytime soon. "You know, Nick, you could always just go pull my car around to the covered walk, I can get in there." Rikki offered.

"Maybe in a bit." Nick led her to a part of the building Rikki had never been in before. "Up here." He gestured to a set of metal stairs in the corner of the science department.

The stairs led to a small room almost entirely made up of windows. Plants covered the walls from floor to ceiling, creating a warm and green atmosphere.

"The green room." Nick announced as they both stepped inside. "Well, it's not a proper greenhouse, but it's the school's excuse for one." He patted a chair near the biggest window. "Sit with me a while."

Rikki obliged, sitting next to him and leaning her head against his shoulder. For the first time that day, she felt relaxed. "I'm glad we're here, I don't want to go home."

"Mags will come around." Nick rubbed her arm reassuringly. "Just give her time, it's a big adjustment."

Rikki closed her eyes as she breathed in Nick's warmth. Suddenly, she remembered what Denman had said. "Hey." She sat up. "How come you didn't tell me you would be assisting Denman in our sessions?"

Nick frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Denman said she would be bringing in an assistant." Rikki's eyes narrowed. "And she made it seem like it would be you."

"She hasn't said a word to me about it." Nick shrugged. "But I hope she's not depending much on me, there's no way I'd ever agree to help her with anything."

"Ok." Rikki felt reassured as she let her head fall back onto Nick's shoulder.

The two sat there together for several hours. It was night by the time rain stopped and they finally headed home.

27. Testing 1 2

The moon had risen high into the night sky by the time Rikki and Nick said their goodbyes.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come in?" Nick nodded towards Rikki's front door.

"Thank you, but no." Rikki shook her head. "It looks like Mags is still awake, I want to try to talk to her before she goes to bed."

"Alright." Nick twisted his fingers in Rikki's hair and pulled her in for a kiss. It was several seconds before he released her.
"Goodnight."

"Night." Rikki watched as he walked down the path and headed for his own home. She sighed before unlocking her front door and stepping inside. "Mags?"

"I'm in the living room." Mags's voice came from down the hall.

"What are you working on?" Rikki found her Aunt sitting elbow-deep in printed pages of testimony.

"I'm just finishing up, actually." Mags immediately began straightening the pages and shoving them into two large boxes. "Early morning tomorrow, it's time I get to bed."

"It's Friday, Mags." Rikki spoke quietly from the doorway. "You don't have work tomorrow."

"Right." Mags froze for a few seconds before resuming her clean up. "I think I'll go into the office tomorrow morning anyway, it'll be a good way to get caught up on a few things."

Rikki watched as Mags hurried out of the room and up the stairs without saying another word. She knew that Mags hated working on Saturdays. She'd spent many a minute listening as Mags complained about her boss asking her to put in extra time on the weekends.

Rikki knew she needed to give Mags space and time to deal with the shock of finding out that her niece was a mermaid, but waiting was hard. Rikki thought back to how lucky she'd been since her first transformation. How many people knew about her and her friends? Well, Lewis of course. And Zane, and Will. And there was Charlotte and Ash, too. She'd been really lucky so far, most everyone that knew her

secret had kept it. And, Rikki realized, most of them had been ok with it. Why was Mags having such a hard time? Of course, Denman hadn't been a ray of sunshine either. Maybe she had just had a lot of luck. Either way, Rikki was more than ready for Mags to warm back up towards her.

Rikki's phone chirped in her pocket. "Hey, Nick." She answered.

"Want to go out on the boat tomorrow?" He asked without preamble. "I checked the weather, we should be alright."

Rikki couldn't help but grin. "That sounds nice."

"Great. See you at the dock at noon? Oh, and you should bring the necklace and your blue moon rocks, we can do a little testing." Nick's voice crackled through the phone. "The full moon is on Sunday, after all."

"Oh..." Rikki's face fell. "Are you sure that's such a good idea? I mean, working on it with just the two of us? If I go all moon struck and make you do something, who will keep us in check?"

"Whoa, relax." Nick's voice grew slightly more gentle. "It was just an idea, we can work on it another time."

"I'll see you tomorrow at noon." Rikki stood and walked up the stairs to her bedroom. She unceremoniously dropped her phone on the bed and opened the wooden box on her nightstand. There, gently glittering in the moonlight, lay the blue stone necklace. Rikki picked it up, watching as the facets sent blue light reflecting onto the walls.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but Rikki was intimidated by the little necklace. Who knew just what it could do? Rikki knew that Nick was right, they should be running tests and developing a plan, but she was reluctant to use Nick as her test subject. Still...

Rikki wrapped the necklace in a t-shirt and tucked it into her back, along with her two moon pool necklaces. After triple checking to make sure they couldn't touch each other in her bag, she zipped it up tight and set it by the door. The only way to get over her fear of the necklace would be to use it, and where better than out in the ocean where no one could see them?

Rikki quickly changed into her jammies, crawled into bed, and switched off the light.

* * *

><p>Rikki woke up early, despite the fact that she could have slept in if she'd wanted to. As usual, Mags had already disappeared by the time Rikki got downstairs. Rikki looked around the empty kitchen, making an internal plan to try to talk to Mags tonight.<p>

It was early, but Rikki walked outside into the bright sunshine a few minutes later. She took a deep breath to calm the butterflies in her stomach as she climbed into her car.

Suddenly, an idea struck her. She pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed it quickly.

"Hey, Hadley?" A lot of noise was coming from the other end of the phone, she strained to hear his answer.

"Rikki, what's up?" Hadley's voice eventually crackled through the ear piece.

"The full moon is tomorrow, will you be around tonight to do some practicing with the blue stone necklace?" Rikki paced the driveway as she waited for his reply.

"Oh, I'm sorry Rikki." More noise came through the other line. "But I have plans tonight. Could... you work today?"

"I can't, I have plans with Nick." Rikki answered.

"Oh." Now silence came from Hadley's line. Seconds later he spoke. "Well I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, I guess." Rikki tried not to feel too disappointed. "I'll talk to you later."

She hung up the phone as she sat down in her car and started the engine. She would have to work on the necklace today with Nick. She'd hoped that Hadley could have helped them test it out tonight, after she and Nick had spent the day together. Oh well. they'd just have to work alone.

Rikki parked the car across the street from Nick's house. It was only ten o'clock, two hours earlier than she was scheduled to meet Nick at the dock. Rikki saw no movement in the house, so she walked on down to the boat by herself.

Rikki dropped her bag over the side of the boat and breathed in the salty morning ocean air. Carefully, she set her phone and her watch on the edge of the dock and kicked off her shoes. It had been far too long since she'd been out swimming, and she was due to meet Nick out here in just a couple hours...

With one swift push off the dock, Rikki dove out into the water. She took her time powering herself through the water, enjoying the freeing feeling as her legs transformed into a long golden fin.

The Florida water was utterly gorgeous as the morning rays of sun shone through onto the sand below. Rikki watched as a school of fish scattered at her appearance.

After taking a long and relaxing swim far out into the sea, Rikki carefully surfaced. The sun was almost directly overhead, it must be just about noon and time to meet Nick. Reluctantly, Rikki turned back towards shore and sped in.

"I figured that's where you were." Nick seemed amused as he looked down at Rikki, who had just surfaced at the edge of his dock. Nick rolled up his pants and sat at the edge of the wooden dock, letting his legs dangle into the water. "How is it out there?"

"It's perfect." Rikki said dreamily, propping herself up on her

elbows. "Why go out on the boat? Let's just swim today."

"How about we compromise?" Nick grinned at her as he leaned forward. "We'll boat out to the open ocean and then, after we've anchored, we can swim."

"Deal." Rikki held her arms in the air.

After a quick check to make sure no one was around, Nick pulled Rikki out of the ocean and watched as she dried off. "I never quite got used to the change." He mused as Rikki stood up and dusted off her pants. "Shall we?"

A few minutes later, Rikki and Nick were flying across the ocean in the boat, headed for the deep blue of the open sea.

"I brought the stones." Rikki announced once they had anchored the boat.

"Really?" Nick raised his eyebrows. "I didn't think you were interested in working with them."

"I don't want to, really." Rikki shrugged. "But the full moon is tomorrow, I need to stop putting it off."

"Ok." Nick seemed a little excited. "Let's make a plan."

* * *

><p>"Ready?" Rikki asked nervously. She carefully checked the words on the page before looking back at Nick, who was standing calmly beside her.<p>

"You'll be fine, just touch the stones together and read what we decided on. Tell me to take off my shoes, it's perfectly harmless and a good test." Nick encouraged her, rubbing Rikki's arms.

"Ok." Rikki took a deep breath and carefully held the blue stone from Australia's moon pool next to the blue amulet she'd found a month ago in the ocean. Her eyes flickered up to Nick's. "Ready?"

Wordlessly, Nick nodded.

Slowly, deliberately, Rikki pushed the two gems together. The moment they connected, the same blue light filled the boat's cabin.

* * *

><p>"Rikki? Rikki!"<p>

Suddenly, Rikki gasped. "What happened?"

The blue light had vanished, but everything else looked the way it was supposed to. Nick was standing directly in front of her, and he had apparently been shaking her shoulders.

"You went moon struck." Nick released her, seeming disappointed. "I tried to get you to give me a command, but you were gone. So I pulled the stones apart and you snapped out of it."

Rikki looked down at her hands, each clutching a blue gem. "Should we try again?"

"Yes. Maybe you just needed to get warmed up." Nick took a few steps back, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"Ok." Rikki focused her brain as hard as she could, repeating the same sentence to herself over and over. "Take off your shoes, take off your shoes, take off your..."

* * *

><p>"Rikki?"<p>

Rikki pulled her eyes open. This time Nick had one of the stones in his hand, and she was holding the other one tightly. Rikki looked down at Nick's still-tied shoes. "It didn't work, did it?"

"Nah." Nick dropped the stone onto the table. "You went moon struck again, I tried to get you to say something, but you mostly just stood there."

"Damn." Rikki sat cross legged on the floor. "I don't know what happens, it's like I'm somewhere else, I can't control it."

"Don't worry, we'll keep practicing." Nick reassured her. "But how about a swim first? I'm sure you could use a break."

Rikki agreed immediately, and, after Nick changed into his swim trunks, they jumped into the water a few minutes later.

Swimming with Nick was thrilling. They swam hand in hand, enjoying the crystal clear blue water of Florida.

Nick pulled Rikki's arm, pulling her so that their bodies were pressed tightly together. He entwined his fingers in her hair as he pressed his lips to hers, wrapping one arm around her waist.

Rikki allowed herself to get lost in the moment, enjoying the feeling of their closeness. Her hands wandered over Nick's back, scratching up his back with her nails. She was just about to take it to another level... when Nick's eyes shot open.

He pointed excitedly up to the surface, kicking his way up to the oxygen as he beckoned for Rikki to follow him.

"What is it?" Rikki asked as Nick sputtered on seawater.

"I have an idea!" Nick rubbed salt water from his eyes. "Ok, we've been testing the stone, right?"

"Right." Rikki wondered where he was going with this. She was still trying to catch her breath from their make out session.

"We know you used it on the beach and in my room on the night of the full moon, and we saw your friends testing it out at Hadley's house." Nick's eyes were bright.

"You're right, but what is your idea?" Rikki reached for his hand.

"We try it in the water!" Nick seemed more animated than he had been all day. "Try it as a mermaid, Rikki. It could make a difference."

"Can't we just swim for a little while longer?" Rikki wrapped her arms around Nick's neck, hoping they could get back to what they had been doing."

"Oh come on, let's just do a quick test." Nick began swimming back towards the boat.

Reluctantly, Rikki followed him to the boat's side. Nick climbed deftly out of the water and retrieved the stones, carrying them back down to Rikki. "Oh wait!" He called as he scrambled back onto the ship. He reappeared moments later. "Forgot these." He nodded towards the shoes he now wore on each foot.

Nick's excitement was contagious and Rikki's heartbeat picked up as they treaded water together. Nick held on tightly to the edge of the boat, the water lapping around his shoulders. He exhaled. "Now really concentrate."

Rikki nodded, grasping the two stones in her hands. Very carefully, she touched them together.

Immediately, the instant the two blue stones made contact, everything changed. The same blue light filled Rikki's vision, filling her with a calm but powerful feeling. Rikki's mind began to race, filled with things she wanted to do

'No.' She thought to herself, though she found it incredibly difficult to focus. 'There was something I was supposed to say...'

Her eyes landed on Nick through a sea of blue haze. He looked so devastatingly handsome there in the water, his hair cascading over his face in blue tinted dripping waves. All thoughts of anything else disappeared from Rikki's mind as she moved closer to him.

But wait, he was moving...

Rikki frowned. What was he doing? She managed, however, not to say anything.

It took a great deal of effort, but Rikki forced herself to focus all of her attention on Nick, though she couldn't seem to keep her hands from wandering over his body. He was talking, she realized. But what was he saying?

Suddenly, her head cleared. The blue light was gone, and she found herself with her arms wrapped around Nick's waist.

"What do you remember?" Nick's voice was gentle in Rikki's ear.

Confused, Rikki released him and moved back to give him some space. Nick was holding the blue stones in each hand, she noticed.

"I took them from you." He blushed slightly as he spoke. "You seemed

like you were kind of lucid at first, but then you kinda..."

Rikki remembered everything this time. "Yeah, thanks for stopping me." Her face flushed.

"Hey, at least you didn't command me to obey you or anything." Nick shrugged. "This time was different, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Rikki's brow furrowed as she thought over this last test. True, she could remember everything, and it had felt like she'd been able to stay in control, at least for a little while. Being in the water had definitely made a difference. "Let's try again." She said eagerly. It finally felt like they were getting somewhere.

Nick handed Rikki the stones as she took a long deep breath.

This time, she was ready for the blue light. It was an odd sensation, almost like she were weightless and dreaming at the same time. She opened her mouth to speak, surprised that her muscles seemed to be obeying her. Her tongue tingled slightly as she thought over the words she wanted to say. She paused momentarily as she caught Nick's piercing gaze, and almost lost her concentration. It took a great deal of effort to force the words out, but she finally managed to speak. "Take... off... your..." Her eyes darted down to his swim shorts, but she wrenched her brain back into focus. "Shoes." She gasped as she finished the sentence.

Nick laughed brightly as he did exactly what Rikki had instructed, pulling his shoes off immediately and throwing them over the side of the boat.

"We did it." He pulled Rikki in for a tight hug, causing her hands to pull the stones apart.

Rikki immediately popped back into reality, all too happy to find herself once again wrapped up in Nick's arms "It worked." She breathed.

"Ok." Nick seemed happier than he'd been in ages. "Now we practice."

"You really think we can master this by tomorrow?" Rikki asked doubtfully.

"I think it's going to be hard, but if anyone can do it it's you." Nick cupped her face in the palm of his hand and gave her a soft kiss on the neck.

Rikki felt a rush of determination. "Ok." She said firmly. "Let's practice."

28. Breaking Plans and Jumping Off

'We will be meeting at precisely 4:15 at the practice pool.'

Rikki reread the message a couple times before typing her reply.

'No, need somewhere with open moonlight. We'll meet on the beach,

I'll text a location later today.'

Rikki sighed as she dropped her phone onto her desk. Today was the day, ready or not. Her stomach tied up in knots as she tapped her fingers nervously. Their plan was a weak one at best, but they'd practiced for hours before deciding that they were really ready.

It was a simple plan, almost too simple. They would get Denman onto the beach while Rikki stood in the moonlight. She'd gotten pretty good at maintaining her focus under the influence of the moonlight, and she was confident she could hold onto control. Then, once Denman was standing in front of Rikki, Rikki would command her to repeat these words.

'All this mermaid stuff is fake, I'm just looking for cheap publicity.'

Then, Nick would pull out his camera and record her as she spoke, careful to leave Rikki out of the shot.

That was step one. Step two included Rikki commanding Denman to hand write a note about how she was working on an elaborate hoax to ensure funding for her next research expedition.

Step three involved Rikki commanding Denman to destroy all of her mermaid research. The plan was for Nick to accompany Denman to her office to watch as she deleted all files and shredded all hard copies.

Rikki was more than a little nervous about step three. She didn't like the idea of leaving Nick alone with Denman. Still, Nick reassured her, she would remain under Rikki's control until the moon set, so she would be of no danger to him.

And that was that. The next morning, when the moon set and the sun began to rise, Denman would be officially discredited. Even if she had hidden backups of her research, her statement on camera and hand-written note would surely be enough to convince anyone noteworthy that she was a fraud.

Rikki swallowed hard. A lot was riding on this plan, and she wasn't sure she was quite ready for it. Her phone beeped, signaling a return text from Denman.

'Fine. Send location asap. I'm assuming you'll be coming alone?'

'No.' Rikki typed back, steeling herself for Denman's anger. 'Nick will be coming along as well.' She pressed send, waiting for Denman to shoot back an impatient answer. Instead, she was surprised to read the response.

'That's fine. I'll be bringing a friend as well.'

Instantly, Rikki felt an uneasy feeling settle into her stomach. Denman wasn't supposed to bring anyone. Whoever she brought would see her face and then know her secret, and that was against their contract.

A knock on the front door shook her out of her thoughts. Rikki

checked the peep hole before opening it, relieved to see Nick standing on the other side. She pulled the door open, glad to see his face.

"What's wrong?" Nick frowned immediately, taking in the expression on Rikki's face.

"Denman." Rikki answered, closing the door behind him.

"She won't agree to meet on the beach?" Nick dropped into a kitchen chair, reaching for an apple.

"No, she was fine with that." Rikki paced. "She asked if I was coming alone and I said no, I was coming with you."

"And..." Nick bit into the apple as he leaned forward in his chair.

"And she said that was fine. She was bringing someone too." Rikki sat beside him.

"What?" Nick's face screwed up as he puzzled over Rikki's words. "She can't do that."

"She said she had an assistant who knew all about this already." Rikki recounted. "That's got to be who it is."

"Whoa whoa whoa..." Nick stood suddenly. "She has an assistant? How is that allowed?"

"It isn't, really, but Denman said it's someone who knew already." Rikki shook her head. "The contract prohibits her from telling anyone, but it doesn't say anything about people who knew about the secret before the contract was signed."

"So who is it?" Nick walked slowly to the other side of the kitchen as he pondered the question.

Rikki's heart sank as she realized exactly what conclusion Nick was bound to come to. Sure enough, moments later...

"It's Hadley!" Nick punched the cabinet as the answer hit him. "I knew we couldn't trust him, Rikki. He's got to be the one helping Denman."

"We don't know that, Nick." Rikki rubbed at her temples. "A lot of people know the secret. There's Zane's Dad, plus Charlotte, and-"

"It's Hadley, Rikki." Nick clenched his jaw angrily. "And you know it."

Rikki shook her head, not sure of what to say. She knew, deep down, that Nick was probably right, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it. She'd poured her heart out to Hadley, trusted him. He couldn't have betrayed her, he just couldn't have. She couldn't be that bad a judge of character, could she?

Nick seemed to be reading her mind. He moved to stand in front of her, placing a hand firmly on each of her shoulders. "This isn't your

fault." He looked into her eyes as he spoke.

"It is." Rikki said quietly, pulling away from him. "I got close to Hadley, I told him everything."

"You didn't." Nick shook his head, realizing the guilt Rikki must be feeling. "He caught you, you couldn't help it."

"He caught me because I was careless." Rikki spoke. "And then I told him _everything._" She folded her arms tightly over her chest. "I was just so glad to have someone to talk to, I... I told him a lot of things."

Nick kicked at the hem of his pants, looking down at the ground as he spoke. "Look. I don't know everything that's gone on.. between you two." His face flushed slightly. "But blaming yourself isn't going to help anything."

"You're right." Rikki knew that he was. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed it. "I'm calling him. The least he can do is admit it." Rikki listened as the phone rang several times before flipping through to voice mail. "No answer." She said, disappointed.

"That's ok." Nick seemed ready to change the subject. "Let's practice for tonight."

* * *

><p>A couple hours later, the pair were as ready as they would ever be. They had reviewed the plan until they knew it backwards, and had practiced with the crystal so much that Rikki couldn't imagine losing control. They walked to meet Denman on the beach, a secluded section of sand about half a mile past Nick's house.<p>

"How many minutes do we have?" Rikki asked for the second time.

"She should have been here five minutes ago." Nick checked his watch.

"You're sure we told her the right place?" Rikki asked anxiously.

"Positive." Nick looked up and down the long beach line. "Maybe she got held up?"

Rikki dialed Denman's number, slamming the phone against her hand as it went through to voicemail. "She isn't answering."

Hadley had never answered or returned her call, though neither brought up that fact.

"The moon rises in ten minutes." Rikki's voice sounded hollow. "And she still isn't here."

"You'll be able to stay in control." Nick assured her.

The minutes ticked by painfully slowly, but no sign of Denman.

The moon was due to rise in less than three minutes when Rikki's

phone finally bleeped. "Nick..." She whispered as her hand clenched in her chest.

Nick took the phone from her, reading the message aloud. "Did you think I could be fooled that easily?" He read in disbelief. "I know all about the crystal and what it can do. We'll be meeting tomorrow at 4pm, then I'll be taking my research public."

The pair stood in silence as the moon began to rise. Rikki could feel the familiar fuzzy feeling take her over as the moonlight shone across her face, but she couldn't make herself say anything just yet.

"Rikki..." Nick reached for her hand but she shook free of him.

"It is Hadley." Rikki heard herself speaking. "No one else could have told her about the crystal."

"Come on." Nick nodded up the shore. "Let's go home. To my house."

"No." Rikki shook her head hard, unbelievably angry at herself. "I'm going out to the ocean."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Nick worried, pulling at her elbow as she began marching out towards the waves.

"Nick, please." Rikki said firmly. "I don't want to have to command you." She fingered at the necklace as it hung heavily against her collar bone.

Nick raised his eyebrows, but didn't say another word. He watched as Rikki ran towards the tide, disappearing into it a moment later.

* * *

><p>The sun was high in the sky by the time Rikki resurfaced. Her muscles ached from swimming, but she felt strangely free. How much longer would she have her freedom?<p>

Nick was asleep on his dock as Rikki swam up to it. He jerked awake as water splashed onto his face. "You're back?" He murmured sleepily.

"I am." Rikki said plainly as she dried herself off. She immediately stood and began marching up the beach towards the road.

"Wait, where are you going?" Nick ran after her, taking only a moment to catch up.

"Home." Rikki's eyes remained focused as she marched. "And then to Hadley's. He has some questions to answer."

Mags, as usual, was gone by the time the pair got there. She'd begun working every Saturday. Rikki knew she just wanted to be out of the house, and away from Rikki.

Rikki dialed Hadley's number once more, listening to the rings before it clicked through once again to voice mail. She set her phone down on a stack of books Lewis had left behind before dropping into a

kitchen chair. "We're right back where we started." She said wearily.

"Yeah." Nick sighed, pulling a book from the middle of the stack and flipping through it absently. "Why did Lewis leave these?"

"I don't think he meant to." Rikki ran her fingers through her hair as her mind raced. What could they do? The only answer she kept coming up with was... nothing.

"Really?" Nick continued chattering. "Because a couple of these are pretty interesting-"

"Will you stop talking about the book?" Rikki snapped, instantly regretting her tone. "It won't help anyway, she already knows all about the crystal." She said, deflated.

"I wasn't talking about using the crystal." Nick said coolly as he pushed the open book across the table to Rikki. "Read this."

* * *

><p>"I know, Lewis." Rikki said impatiently. "But would it work?"<p>

"Rikki..." Lewis answered tiredly over the speaker phone. "It's by the same author as the one we found years ago, but I haven't even opened it yet. I have no idea if it will work. If I could run a few tests-"

"We don't have time for tests." Rikki responded. "We only have a few hours until I'm supposed to meet Denman."

"Then give it a try." Lewis sounded unsure. "I guess the worst that can happen is that it won't work."

"Or that we'll get stuck that way." Nick spoke from his seat at the table.

"The book says it wears off in 24 hours." Rikki restated.

"Keep me updated." Lewis sounded very far away. "And you guys, please be careful."

"We will." Rikki said breathlessly as she hung up the phone. Her eyes were bright as she turned to Nick. "You really want to try this?"

"I'm not sure." Nick said doubtfully as he examined the page in front of him. "I don't really believe in magic spells, Rikki."

"We've used one before." Rikki sat next to him. "A few years ago. We used a spell from the same collection and we made some kind of wishing paste. And it worked." She examined Nick's expression. "Listen..." She ran a hand reassuringly over his forearm. "If you don't want to try it..."

"I'm ok with it as long as it works." Nick nodded. "But Rikki," his eyes became focused, solemn. "I don't want to be stuck that way."

"Neither do I." Rikki responded quietly.

Nick exhaled as he stood up. "I guess we'd better start collecting ingredients, then."

* * *

><p>It was 3:00 by the time Rikki and Nick made it back home with their findings, barely enough time to get everything done in time to meet Denman. Rikki laid the old book carefully on the counter as she measured precisely, adding the ingredients one by one into a large mixing bowl.<p>

"The sea water?" She held her hand out for Nick to hand the vial to her. The mixture turned a brilliant sparkly blue as she poured it in.

"That's it?" Nick peered into the bowl.

"That's it." Rikki said proudly, checking the spell book one last time.

"And why didn't Lewis show us this before?" Nick tapped his fingers on the table anxiously.

"He said the book was in a bag full that he bought at a closing sale, he hadn't even seen it yet." Rikki gave the potion a last stir for good measure.

"I just don't know, listen." Nick's voice was slightly shaky. "What if it's permanent?"

"It isn't." Rikki answered.

"But how do you know?" Nick pressed. "I mean, come on Rikki, if this thing doesn't wear off, you'll get to go on leading an absolutely normal life while mine will be royally screwed up forever."

"You think I'm royally screwed up?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest.

"What?" Nick shook his head. "No, but what works for you doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun to me. You may enjoy it, but I prefer life on legs, thanks so much."

"And you'll be 100% back to normal by this time tomorrow!" Rikki's voice grew a bit shrill.

"This is a lot to ask, Rikki." Nick leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed tightly. "I mean, you never even asked me if I was ok with doing this in the first place, you just started telling Lewis about how we had a plan to use a spell from his book. A book we had only just found, and don't know anything about!"

"I thought you were on my side no matter what?" Rikki knew she was being selfish, but she couldn't bring herself to back down now. Not when they were so close to a solution.

Nick's eyes were dark as they bore into hers. "Fine." He angrily grabbed the book from the table, checking the measurement before pouring the blue potion evenly into the two waiting glasses. He pushed one towards Rikki, waiting for her to pick it up before grasping her other hand tightly in his. Slightly _too_ tightly, he could feel Rikki's fingers cramped tightly in his. "Bottoms up." He muttered as he tilted the glass upside down and swallowed its contents.

29. Listening, and Hearing

Shocked at Nick's sudden motions, Rikki winced as his hand squeezed hers to the point of pain. Nick's eyes locked with hers, and, in unison, they each swallowed the potion.

For just a moment, nothing happened. Nick was breathing so hard it was coming out more like panting. A bead of sweat ran down his face as he looked at Rikki, who was equally breathless.

"Maybe it's not-" Suddenly, Nick froze. His eyes shot open wide as a shimmering band of gold appeared over their clasped hands, spinning around and around until it looked like one solid band of gold.

Rikki felt her pulse speed up as the golden band began to grow hot on their skin. A funny sensation filled her, as if she were being emptied from the inside out. She managed to focus on Nick, who was having a harder time than she was.

Nick could barely keep himself standing, his legs felt so weak. His breath caught in his throat, and he could hear his heartbeat pounding in his head.

Suddenly, hardly a minute after it had all begun, the golden band exploded in a white hot flash, then disappeared completely.

Nick immediately dropped to his knees, trying desperately to catch his breath. His arms shook too much as he leaned forward on them, and he rolled to his back.

Rikki dropped down next to him, worried at his reaction. She, too, felt strangely weakened, but nothing she couldn't manage. "Are you alright? Nick?" She shook him gently, mopping at his sweaty brow with a napkin from the table.

"I don't feel right." He managed to speak, his face screwed up as he breathed.

"Here, sit up." Rikki pushed his shoulders gently to help him to a vertical position. He slumped forward, his head hanging in front of him.

"Can I have a glass of water?" He rubbed at his temples, looking down at the ground.

"I'm not sure." Rikki stood, moving slowly towards the sink. "Do you think you can? Or did it work?"

Nick jumped to his feet, suddenly electric with energy. "No!" He exclaimed, moving as far from the sink as he could. "I'm not ready

yet."

"We do have to test it." Rikki said gently, trying to soothe him. "Look, I'll go first." She turned on the faucet and slowly ran her hand under the cool water, letting it run through her fingers.

The silence was deafening in the white kitchen as the pair waited ten seconds, then twenty.

"It worked." Rikki breathed in amazement before turning to Nick. "I'm not changing. If it worked for me it had to have worked for you too. That must be why you're having such a hard time dealing with it, all that magic is awfully hard to get used to." She filled a cup with water and began to make her way towards Nick. "Your turn."

"Rikki, I said no." Nick darted around the table, distancing himself from her. "I told you, I'm not ready yet."

"Nick, I have to meet Denman in ten minutes." Rikki pleaded. "It'll just take a moment-"

Nick slammed his hands onto the table, stopping her. "Fine." He muttered the words. "But then I need a break from all of this."

Rikki didn't hesitate, she just poured a small amount of water onto Nick's arm. Exactly ten seconds later, he began to change. He groaned as the transformation took place. Rikki noticed that it took him longer to change than the few seconds she usually experienced.

Finally, the changes stopped. Rikki stood, looking down at Nick, who was spread out on his back on the kitchen tiles. A long golden fin extended from just below his navel down past where his legs normally would have ended.

Nick's eyes were clenched tightly shut as the changes took place, but he pulled them open a fraction as he looked down at himself. "Holy shit." He breathed.

"We did it." Rikki grabbed a towel from the kitchen counter and hastily began towelling him off. "Ok, let's review." She spoke quickly, hoping Nick was listening. "We've switched powers. Or lack of powers. You have all of my mermaid abilities, and I have none. I'm just a normal teenager." She sighed with relief, beginning to feel unbelievably relieved. "We have 24 hours. As long as you stay here, and away from water, you should be able to function just like you always do, ok?" She gave him a quick kiss on the lips before jumping to her feet.

It was several seconds later when Nick's legs reappeared. He let out a shuddering sigh of relief as he hugged his knees to his chest.

"I'm going to run, you just stay here, ok?" Rikki yanked her keys and phone from the counter and dashed out the front door, anxious to be on time to meet with Denman.

Nick watched bitterly as the front door slammed shut behind her before wiping the kiss from his lips.

* * *

><p>Rikki couldn't couldn't stop the smile from spreading across her face as she marched proudly through the door to the practice pool.<p>

"Rikki." Denman smiled wryly as she watched her enter the building. "You'll have to forgive me for missing our meeting yesterday, though even you must understand why I did." She shook her head in mock disapproval. "Trying to double cross me? Not a smart move, Chadwick."

"Can't blame me for trying, though." Rikki shrugged casually. "So... how did you know about the crystal?"

"I have my sources." Denman's eyes glittered as she shot Rikki a sideways look.

"Oh yeah?" Rikki stood up straight, staring back at Denman with an expression of utmost confidence. "Hadley doesn't know everything, you know."

Denman stiffened the moment Rikki said the name, though she immediately tried to regain her composure.

"That's right." Rikki's voice grew even stronger. "We know he's been feeding you information about us."

Denman neither confirmed nor denied Rikki's statement, though she appeared genuinely surprised at Rikki's bluntness. "And what exactly makes you think that?" She said finally.

Rikki ignored Denman's question. She was in no mood for conversation at the moment. It was time to get to the point. Rikki crossed her arms over her chest and spoke as firmly as she could. "I'm not a mermaid anymore." Her words echoed off the concrete.

Denman rolled her eyes, laughing to herself. "You've already used that one, Rikki. I'm not going to fall for it twice."

"Last time was different." Rikki paced, refusing to allow herself to look concerned. "This time it's permanent."

"Sure it is." Denman snatched her water bottle off of the counter and emptied it over Rikki's shoulders, dousing her with water.

Rikki held her breath as she waited, praying that everything was still working as it should.

Nothing happened.

Water dripped from Rikki's clothes as she grinned up at Denman. "I told you."

"It's temporary." Denman spoke, trying to sound untroubled. "Like last time. Your powers will be back in just a few hours."

"You're wrong." Rikki shook her head. "There was something special about the moon last time, it took our powers away for only twelve

hours. This time, I used the crystal. It's a lot more powerful than moonlight alone, D. And it's permanent. Your guinea pig is officially done being tested on."

"I still don't believe you." Denman tried her best to retain her composure, but she was beginning to show signs of panic.

"And I really don't care if you believe me or not." Rikki lied.

"So..." Denman's eyes regained their usual gleam. "When I find you again some time in the future without any warning and throw you into a pool, you're telling me that you will not change into a mermaid?" Denman smirked, clearly sure that this question would throw Rikki off guard.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you." Rikki bluffed, keeping her voice from wavering. "It's all over."

"And when I expose your friends?" Denman tried once more to regain control. "Then what?"

"I have an ironclad contract with you, Denman." Rikki reminded herself to remain firm. "And I haven't violated it. There were no provisions against me regaining my humanity, I've not broken my word. However, if you do, your career will be over."

Denman seemed ready to say something back to Rikki, but she grabbed her phone instead. "I don't believe this." She muttered as she typed and sent a quick message, slamming the phone onto the desk afterwards.

Hadley burst through the door at that moment, still carrying the phone he'd obviously just gotten a message on. "What's wrong?" He said irritably, not sparing so much as a glance in Rikki's direction.

Rikki felt her pulse quicken at Hadley's entrance. Somehow, deep down, she'd been hoping that she and Nick were wrong. That Hadley was really and truly on their side, just pretending to help Denman. But now, looking at him, she knew it was true. Hadley was on Team Denman. She watched as the two whispered furiously back and forth. Slowly, Rikki edged closer to them, trying to pick up on what they were saying.

"She's lying, I'm sure of it." Hadley hissed. "She has to be."

"Well something's up." Denman shot back "She didn't change."

"Then she waterproofed herself somehow." Hadley spun on his heel and quickly crossed to Rikki. Grabbing her arm roughly, he scrubbed at her skin with the palm of his hand. "What did you use, Rikki?" He asked brusquely. "You can't have covered every inch of exposed skin."

"I'm a normal human again." Rikki's voice cracked slightly as she avoided his eyes. She allowed him to scrub at her, pretending to be meek.

"I know you're lying." Hadley took a step back, his face livid. "Get

in the pool."

"What?" Rikki crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "No way, I don't have any other clothes with me and I don't want these to get soaked,:"

"What you're wearing will reappear dry the moment you change back." Hadley took a threatening step closer. "Now get in."

Rikki felt a mixture of pain and anger so powerful she could hardly breathe. She didn't recognize the man standing in front of her right now. It was hard to believe that she had confided in him just a few short weeks ago.

"Fine." Rikki spoke so quietly she hardly hear herself. Holding her head up high, Rikki marched to the pool's steps. Slowly, she lowered herself until the water lapped at her collar bones. A tense ten seconds passed before Rikki spoke again. "Happy? No change." She shrugged sullenly, still trying to appear unbothered.

"All the way under." Denman moved to stand next to Hadley. The pair stared down at Rikki with matching expressions of doubt.

Rikki locked reproachful eyes with Hadley as she picked up her feet, allowing herself to sink completely into the water. She remained suspended in the silence for a few seconds before resurfacing and marching up the steps and out of the pool. "Still human." She said quietly but triumphantly, giving both Denman and Hadley level gazes. She pulled a towel from the bin and began soaking the dripping water from her hair and clothes. "I'll see you around." She muttered as she started towards the door.

"Did I say you could leave?" Denman called after her, her voice echoing off the tiles.

Rikki rolled her eyes as she turned around. "Why have me stay? There's nothing more you can get from me."

"Have a seat." Denman fixed Rikki with a steely eye and jerked her elbow towards a metal chair in front of her equipment. "We were scheduled to meet and we're going to have our session."

The next ninety minutes were incredibly painful for Rikki, both mentally and physically. Denman shoved metal rods into her skin, drawing blood more than once as she took measurements for her files. Once, she even injected water below Rikki's veins. Just, Rikki figured, in case it would cause a change in her. Rikki bit her lip, determined not to let Denman know how much she was hurting her. Hadley paced from wall to wall, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He said nothing, but watched with an intent expression on his face the whole time.

Finally, just when Rikki thought she could stand no more, Denman clicked her clipboard shut. "Don't think this is the end of this, Rikki." She spoke without looking at her.

"Wait." Hadley spoke up. "What about her friends? We can still be famous. Just expose Cleo and Bella." He shot a triumphant look at Rikki, making her stomach churn with hatred.

"We have a contract." Denman's voice sounded somewhat hollow. "And I'll honor it. Though I will be returning. To be sure our human mermaid stays human." Her voice echoed throughout the pool house.

Rikki paused on her way to the door, unsure of whether or not to continue. Making up her mind, she pushed through it and hurried to her car.

The air felt fresh as it flowed into her lungs. It was the air of freedom, and though she wasn't sure if she'd really gotten rid of Denman, she felt confident that she'd made a big step towards ridding herself of the malicious doctor for good.

Mags still hadn't returned home when Rikki arrived back at the house, she noted. It was rather late for a Saturday, but it had become the norm.

"Nick!" Rikki called as she pulled the door closed behind her. "Nick, it went really well!" She waited, but heard nothing.

"Nick?" Rikki took a few steps into the kitchen, looking around for the familiar brown mop of hair. Her eyes landed on a handwritten note left on the counter.

'Gone home.' Was all it said.

Groaning in frustration, Rikki grabbed her keys and headed to the car.

"Hello?" Rikki knocked lightly on the front door as she pushed it open. Nick's mother's car wasn't in the driveway, but Nick's was. "Nick, it's me. Rikki. I have a lot to tell you." She peered into the kitchen, but saw no sign of her friend.

A thump from the second floor gave her a hint as to where he might be.

"Did you really expect me to just wait at your house?" Nick was sprawled across his bed as Rikki walked into the room.

"I was only gone a bit." Rikki said quietly, taking in his surly demeanor.

"You were gone for two whole hours." Nick sat up suddenly.

"I'm sorry." Rikki held her hands out in surrender. "But listen, Denman-

"I _don't_ want to hear a word." Nick stood, pacing to the other side of the room. "Rikki, we've got to talk." He wrung his hands in agitation as he spoke, eventually releasing them to run his fingers anxiously through his long hair.

"Ok, let's talk." Rikki could tell he was upset and, though she didn't want to admit it to herself, she felt like she knew exactly why.

"This... this isn't ok!" Nick began to speak. "I was too nervous to wait at your house, but the whole way here I kept thinking..." His

pacing resumed. "I kept thinking, what if I get in a wreck? What if I run into a fire hydrant and get soaked? My whole _life_ would be over, Rikki." He dropped onto the bed, resting his elbows on his knees but not looking at Rikki. "I mean, I feel like you volunteered me to do this whole... _spell_ thing without ever asking me if I was really ok with it. And I'm not."

"You're not." Rikki echoed, unsure of how to respond.

"No!" Nick jumped back to his feet. "I never wanted this, Rik, and it's stressing me out. I'm afraid of myself, and I hate it."

"It's only for twenty four hours..." Rikki stepped timidly towards him. "Then you'll be back to normal."

"Unless I get caught." Nick crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "Then, no matter how normal I am, they'll still want to run tests on me for the rest of my life! I wish we'd never done this. I wish you'd let me tell you how completely _not_ alright with this I am."

"Hey-" Rikki could feel her natural defensiveness begin to rise in her chest. Deep down, she knew he was right, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it. "This is how I lead my life every day, Nick. I'm constantly afraid of being discovered."

"No, you're not afraid of anything." Nick clenched his jaw. "Including being afraid of what could happen to me. I know exactly what could happen, and it terrifies me."

"You're overreacting." Rikki shot back, more harshly than she intended. "Get over it, Nick. This time tomorrow you'll be all back to normal, and this will be my problem again."

"Good!" Nick threw out his arms. "Let it be your problem. I'm done."

"Fine!" Rikki spun on her heel and slammed his bedroom door shut behind her. She marched out of the house without looking back.

30. Making Deals With Demons

Hey guys, I know it's been forever, but I'm determined to finish all of my open stories, starting with this one! A couple chapters left, here's the next one! I hope you like it! :)

S.

* * *

><p>Mags wasn't home when Rikki pulled in, which suited her fine. She was in no mood to try again to have a normal conversation with her Aunt. Mags didn't even make attempts speak to her anymore. Rikki slung her bookbag over the stair railing, groaning as she caught sight of the spell book inside.<p>

She knew this had been a long shot, but it'd worked, hadn't it? And hadn't Nick agreed to help her? It wasn't like she'd forced him into anything.

Her heart ached as she changed into her comfies.

Rikki dropped onto her bed. Even though it was only late afternoon, she curled up under her covers and closed her eyes. Sometime during the night she heard Mags return home, then leave again a while later. She thought nothing of it.

Rikki lay in bed for a long time the next morning. She wasn't trying to be lazy, but she didn't know what to do with herself. Nick wasn't talking to her, Mags wasn't talking to her, Hadley was a great big traitorâ€¦

Rikki sighed as she rolled onto her back. She knew where she should be, whether he wanted her there or not.

With Nick.

He could need her help, what if something happened in public? What if he needed help drying off or something?

Rikki made up her mind. Swinging her legs off the edge of the bed, she dragged herself towards the shower. Her first shower in years. Standing up, anyway. This was going to be weird.

And hour or so later, Rikki was putting the finishing touches on her hair. She shot Nick a quick text to let him know she was on her way over, then snatched her car keys off the counter.

The sun was bright as she stepped out onto the front porch. She quickly locked it behind her and started down the steps.

The cascade of water came out of nowhere. Rikki sputtered and choked in surprise as she looked for the source of it. Water dripped from her hair and down her face. "What the hell, Hadley?"

Hadley stepped forward, dropping the bucket he'd been holding. The one that had, moments before, been filled with cold water.

Rikki did some quick math, her racing pulse beginning to calm as she realized she must have at least another few hours before the spell wore off and she'd turn into a mermaid once more.

"You're an asshole." Rikki spat at Hadley as she turned to go back inside to change out of her wet clothes.

"Wait the ten seconds!" Hadley's arm shot forward, blocking Rikki's way into the house.

Rikki's eyes fixed onto Hadley's, an expression of pure hatred clear on her face. She could feel her heartbeat begin to race as she forced a smirk onto her face.

"5â€¦ 4â€¦ 3â€¦ 2â€¦ 1." She spoke firmly, her voice sounding stronger than she actually felt.

Hadley simply clenched his jaw, refusing to move his arm.

"Excuse me, then." Rikki ducked underneath him and through the front door.

"How did you do it?" Hadley caught the door before it could swing closed. "You have to tell me." His dark eyes seemed to bore straight into Rikki's, trying to hold her in place.

"I don't have to tell you anything." Rikki shot back haughtily.

"Yes, you do." Hadley's voice caught in his throat as he leapt after her. "Tell me how you got changed back to normal."

"Tell me why you went to Denman," Rikki hissed, her voice terrifyingly quiet.

The pair froze inches apart, panting. Hadley's eyes locked onto Rikki's as his hot breath hit her face. There was an intensity to him, something Rikki hadn't seen out of him before.

"Why, Hadley?" Rikki broke their silence.

Hadley crossed his arms over his chest with a grunt. A second later he startled Rikki by quickly beginning to pace the length of the room, running a frustrated hand through his hair as he did so.

"You did call her here because of me, didn't you?" Rikki pushed. "Denman."

"What?" Hadley looked at her, clearly defeated. "No."

Rikki rolled her eyes. "Really, Hadley? You're standing by your story that her coming here 2 weeks after I did is a coincidence?"

"It was an accident." The teacher rubbed his temples as he sank into a kitchen chair.

Rikki stood opposite him at the end of the table. She took in a long, deep breath as she tried to calm her poor heart.

"I already knew that mermaids existed when I met you. I knew they were real, I mean." Hadley blurted out finally. "Denman had told me, years ago, she said she'd done some preliminary testing on so real, live mermaids. She learned a lot, and told me everything. Then two weeks later, she tells me the mermaids were gone, had lost all of their abilities. She had to have been talking about you and your friends." He tilted his head toward Rikki, then looked down at the floor. "You know, I always kind of thought she'd been messing with me. She knew I'd always hoped to find proof of supernatural creatures, I just figured it was a funny story she told to intrigue me."

Rikki nodded, almost imperceptively. "Go on."

"Then," Hadley continued, "When I saw you that day, in the classroom, all of a sudden I knew she'd been telling me the truth. Mermaids were real. I can't remember the last time I felt such excitement. I couldn't believe what I was seeing." He shook his head at the memory. "Rikki, I didn't know you were one of the mermaids from Denman's original research, how could I?"

Rikki waited, but Hadley didn't seem interested in continuing. She

crossed her arms. "And then? " She prompted.

Hadley grimaced, as if the words pained him to be spoken. "I called her that night. Linda. That night after we talked, after you told me everything. I didn't say your name or tell her anything about you." He said quickly. "I just asked questions about her researchâ€¦ on mermaids."

"Great, that's much safer." Rikki's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"She'd been telling me the truth." Hadley didn't seem to know if he was speaking to Rikki or just to himself. "I couldn't believe it, and I wanted to know everything about them that I could."

"And then you just happened to _accidentally_ invite her here?" Rikki couldn't keep the skepticism out of her voice.

"Kind of, yeah." Hadley's voice was quiet. "I mean, she's the one who brought up the open position at Palm U. I was lost thinking about everything she'd just told me, I said something along the lines of 'Yeah, you should check it out,' and then BAM." He shook his head. "Suddenly she was here." He turned to face Rikki. "I absolutely panicked when I found out that she was coming, but I had no idea what was going to happen. I just thought you'd be keeping your secret like normal, the way you do with everyone. I had no idea the two of you had a _history_." Hadley collapsed into an armchair, relieved to have gotten all of that off of his chest. "I didn't know what was going to happen, Rik."

"That's a wonderful story, Had." Rikki's voice dripped with sickeningly false sweetness. "And I think it might even be true." She crossed her arms over her chest as she paced the floor.

"It _is_." Hadley's eyes pierced Rikki's with their intensity. It _is_ the truth."

"Ok, but you left out a part." Rikki stopped, then turned to face him. "How about now you tell me the part where you _betrayed_ me to Denman. You gave away our plan to use the stone on the full moon." She laughed without smiling. "Yesterday you were practically willing to _drown_ me to prove I was still a mermaid."

Hadley's eyes fell to the floor.

Rikki waited, her eyes flaming. "Hello?" She pushed. "Any time now."

"Denmanâ€¦" Hadley paused, taking in a deep breath before continuing. "Denman made me an offer. She knew I wouldn't be able to turn it down." Again, he paused.

Rikki drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter. "What did she offer you?" The curiosity was killing her; she had to know why Hadley had betrayed her.

"She saidâ€¦ if I helped her with youâ€¦ she said she'd tell me how to become a merman."

Whatever Rikki had been expecting to hear, it certainly wasn't that.

She stammered a bit before the words finally came to her. "_You_ want to becomeâ€¦ a _merman_?" She asked incredulously.

Hadley's face flushed as he kicked at the hem of his pants. "Look, I'm already embarrassed enough." He muttered. "I'm not proud of myself."

"Tell me the terms of your deal." Rikki checked the time. Time was flying by, not too much longer until the 24 hour time period was due to expire and her powers would return. She'd need to get rid of Hadley, and soon. She wanted to be at Nick's side when the spell wore off and they both returned to normal.

"Denman saw your name on my class roster." Hadley was saying reluctantly. "It didn't take long for her to figure out why I'd suddenly had so many questions about mermaids. She told me that if I helped her gather information on you she'd tell me the secret of how to make the change."

"And _that_ was all it took?" Rikki could feel her heartbeat pounding angrily in her temples. "If you had this secret, crazy desire why didn't you just ask _me_?"

"I was embarrassed." Hadley's face flushed an even deeper shade of crimson. "It's so sillyâ€¦ for a grown man to want to be a mermanâ€¦"

"No, that's not silly." Rikki said coldly. "What's _silly_ is that you were willing to ruin my life just to get what you wanted."

"I thought it would bring us closer together." Hadley answered meekly. "You know, something in common we could share with one another. Your life is so amazingâ€¦ I just wanted to be a part of it."

"With the added bonus of the total loss of our privacy due to the massive amount of fame we'd encounter once Denman was finished with us." Rikki paced straight to the front door, reaching for the knob.

"Rikki, stop." Hadley hurried to catch her, gripping her elbow. "Look, I know I messed things up, _please_ don't be angry, give me the chance to make things up to-"

"Oh, I'm not angry." Rikki said calmly as she pulled out of Hadley's grip and opened the front door. "I feel sorry for you, Hadley."

Hadley's face fell. "You feelâ€¦"

"Pity." Rikki's face was expressionless. "I feel genuine pity." She paused in the doorway, not turning back to look at Hadley as she spoke. "Denman doesn't know how a person becomes a mermaid." Rikki said quietly. "Your deal was a sham from the beginning. She's been lying to you. You've got no one, Hadley."

Without so much as a quick look back to see Hadley's crestfallen face, she swept out the door.

Rikki drove to Nick's house without stopping, her head swimming with

new information. Hadley wanted to be a _merman_? Another thought tickled irritatingly around in her brain.

Did Denman know the way to turn humans into mers? Rikki didn't want to admit it, but the truth was that it really wouldn't be that hard for Denman to figure it out. After all, she already knew about the moon pool, and she'd seen the magic of the full moon as it moved directly overhead. Rikki had been confident when she'd told Hadley that Denman had been playing him, but now she wasn't so sure.

Rikki's eyes narrowed as she pulled into Nick's driveway. His car was in front of the house, but there wasn't a single light on inside.

"Nick?" Rikki called out as she knocked on the front door. The door swung open a few inches. It hadn't been closed.

"Is anyone home?" Rikki's heart began to pound as she slowly made her way to the stairs to Nick's bedroom.

Nick's door was open, and there, right in the middle, was a note. Taped to the door, right at eye level.

'_Rikki, be at the practice pool at 4pm sharp. Nick would greatly appreciate it._'

Rikki gritted her teeth as she recognized the flowery script.
"Denman."

* * *

><p>It felt like bricks were weighing on her chest as Rikki drove to the practice pool. She was feeling so much that it didn't seem possible to really feel anything at all. Not fright. Not dread. Not worryâ€¦ just pent up numbness.<p>

Denman had Nick.

The spell had not expired, which meant he was still a merman. What, had Hadley only been sent to Rikki's house to distract her while Denman kidnapped Nick? What was she up to?

Rikki parked outside the practice pool at 3:50, only 30 minutes before the spell was due to wear off. She slammed the car door and marched to the entrance, telling herself she was ready for anything. Her mind was racing, she had an idea. Well, the beginnings of one.

"Ah, Rikki." Denman smiled coolly as Rikki burst inside. "So glad you could make it. You're late."

"Where's Nick?" Rikki couldn't see him anywhere. She crossed her arms over her chest tightly, trying not to show her nerves.

Denman's eyes flickered over to the pool as she gave Rikki a cruel smile. "I'm impressed." Denman resumed jotting notes on the clipboard in front of her as Rikki walked hesitantly to the edge of the pool. "I must admit, I had no idea you were capable of a spell this strong. I've so much to learn."

As Rikki looked down into the pool her heart clenched, and her breath caught in her throat.

There was Nick, all the way at the bottom of the pool. He was lying on his back, tethered to the pool floor by a thick chain, his arms tightly wrapped around himself. His eyes were open, angry, and fixed on the blue wall in front of him. His (temporary) long blue tail glimmered in the water.

"Get him out of there." Rikki said angrily. "Now."

"In time." Denman didn't seem remotely fazed by Rikki's harsh tone. "Rikki, are you aware that this pool has an electric, automatic cover?"

Rikki frowned, confused. "What?"

"All I have to do isâ€¦ push this button here." She rested a manicured finger on a blue button on the wall. "And a hard, plastic cover will slide into place across the surface of the pool, effectively trapping anything inside until it is reopened."

Rikki suddenly understood what Denman was threatening. She whipped around to look back into the pool, noting the fact that Nick's chains were bolted firmly to the walls of the pool, keeping him trapped under the water.

"You can't do this to him, he's not really a merman!" Panic gripped at Rikki's throat. "Denman, he could change back to a human any moment now."

"I know that." Denman cooed back as she dropped something into a test tube.

"Fine. What do you want?" The words flew out of Rikki's mouth as she tried to keep breathing regularly. She had to get Nick out _now_. Denman clearly knew about their switching spell, and knew approximately when it would wear off. If the spell wore off and he became human again while trapped under the waterâ€¦ Well, Rikki couldn't think about that right now. She would get him out in time. "Seriously, Denman. _What_ do you _want_?"

"I thought so." Denman's voice was terrifyingly quiet. "How long is the spell in effect?"

"Not much longer. Get him out of there _now_." Rikki quickly kicked off his shoes. "Or I'll do it myself."

"Be my guest." Denman said flippantly, waving her hand absently in the direction of the pool.

Rikki paused for a mere moment , waiting to see if Denman would stop her, but she really seemed uninterested.

Rikki didn't waste another second. She dove into the water, kicking hard with her human legs to get to the bottom of the pool to Nick.

The chain would tightly around his waist and was secured out from his

hips to opposite concrete walls, keeping Nick from moving in any direction.

Rikki's lungs protested at the sudden exertion. She wasn't used to swimming without her fin. She quickly released one side of the chain. As she began swimming towards the opposite wall, a tightening gripped at her chest. Something was happening, and Nick's panicked eyes made it quite clear to her what it was.

They were changing back, and they were changing right now. The spell was wearing off.

Rikki felt immediately rejuvenated as her legs slowly changed into her familiar fin. She began kicking wildly, pushing herself towards the wall. She quickly released the chain. Nick was already fighting to the surface as the chain fell free of him.

He desperately gasped in oxygen as he broke the surface, frantically drawing in breath after breath. His jeans were waterlogged and heavy, but he made it to the concrete pool edge.

Rikki surfaced a moment later, immediately swimming to the pool edge next to Nick.

"Are you ok?" She asked gently, running a hand lightly across his back.

"Don't touch me." Nick's voice was quiet but firm as he pulled his shoulder away from her.

Denman's icy laugh echoed off the concrete walls. "Not getting along anymore? I'm shocked." She smirked. "It really wasn't that hard to figure everything out, guys. You and your friends aren't the only ones with access to old spell books. I've had my people on it, recording research on that material for years now. Though I guess I didn't actually need their research, not when I have a source like-

The pool room door swung open, cutting Denman off, and Hadley stumbled inside. He immediately stalked towards Denman and began speaking to her in hushed but angry tones.

Nick was tiredly pulling himself out of the water to sit on the pool deck.

"Nick, I'm sorry." Rikki whispered after drying off, leaning in. "I don't know Denman had us figured out. I'm still not even sure how she figured us out, but-

"Mags told her." Nick exhaled wearily, resting his head on one hand. "Denman told me after she'd kidnapped me." His tone was more than a little bitter.

"What?" Rikki didn't think she could handle any more shocks today.

"It's true."

Rikki froze, realizing that Denman had been listening to them.

"Mags found the spell book in your bag." Denman continued. "And then she brought it right to me. She wants to fix you, Rikki."

"Fix me?" Rikki tried to sound tough, but only felt small and weak.

Hadley hadn't spoken a word, apart from his hushed conversation with Denman when he'd first arrived. He didn't seem happy, and he was leaning against the wall with an unpleasant scowl on his face.

"Hadley, bring me that notebook?" Denman asked flippantly.

"Not until you answer me." Hadley shot back humorlessly.

"We can discuss that later." Denman seemed anxious to change the subject. "We need-"

"No, you can answer me now." Hadley said angrily, stalking to stand next to the blonde scientist.

"Later." Denman fixed him with an icy glare.

"Were you lying to me?" Hadley pressed. "Do you even know how to make a person into a mer?"

Looking at the doctor, Rikki knew that she had no answer for him. It was crystal clear on her face. She had been bluffing to Hadley, and now she was clearly upset at being outted in front of her two captives.

"Mags wants you to fix me?" Rikki changed the direction of the talk, ready to get back to the main subject.

"Not only that." Denman turned to look down at Rikki as Hadley fumed. "She's given me permission to perform whatever tests necessary in order for me to do so. She's your legal guardian while you're here, she has the power. "

"I'm 18." Rikki muttered through gritted teeth. "But it doesn't matter, she wouldn't do that." Rikki's mouth went dry. Just days ago, Mags had been helping Rikki draw up a contract protecting her from Denman. Now she was letting her take over?

As much as Rikki wanted to be shocked, she couldn't summon the feelings. Mags had barely been able to look at her since she'd found out Rikki's secret. She hated it, and she'd seen an opportunity to make Rikki human again, somehow Rikki wasn't surprised she'd taken it.

"But you don't want to cure me." Rikki couldn't tell if she was thinking out loud or just stalling.

"Nope, sure don't." Denman said absently as she adjusted a microscope over a new slide.

"If she cures me then she can't continue her research." This time Rikki really was just talking to herself. It didn't make her feel any better.

"I think she knows that already." Nick said as he stretched his stiff legs.

Hadley was still pacing angrily, clearly lost in thought.

"I'll make you a deal!" Rikki exclaimed suddenly, an idea popping into her head.

"What?" Nick suddenly seemed wide awake. "Rikki, let's talk before-"

"I can make you a deal you won't want to pass up." Rikki spoke confidently, tossing her head back as she gazed at Denman.

Now Hadley's attention was piqued. His brow furrowed as he focused his attention on Rikki.

Rikki had begun to walk towards Denman but was immediately yanked backward by Nick.

"What are you offering her?" He hissed at her.

"Exactly what she wants the most." Rikki yanked her arm out of Nick's grip and approached Denman, standing nose to nose with her.

"Yes?" Denman seemed amused at Rikki's confidence.

"You tell my Aunt you've cured me." Rikki spoke quickly, firmly. "Tell her you've figured it out, I'm human again. I'll work another twenty-four hour switching spell, just long enough to convince her." Nick stiffened at mention of the spell. Rikki knew he wouldn't be happy about going through that again.

Denman smirked, haughtily crossing her arms over her chest. "And why would I want to do that?"

"Because if you doâ€¦" Rikki pulled in a deep breath, "I'll tell you how to turn humans into mermaids."

Hadley's eyebrows shot up to the ceiling as Denman's eyes snapped onto Rikki's, a suspicious look on her face.

"And what kind of guarantee do I have that you're telling me the truth?" Denman asked carefully.

"You have my name." Rikki's voice shook slightly. "If I'm not telling the truthâ€¦ Expose me. Tell everyone my secret." She stepped a bit closer to Denman. "But if I am telling the truthâ€¦" Rikki watched the wheels turning behind Denman's eyes.

"I could take volunteers." Denman was speaking under her breath. "Pay them, run tests, get the paperwork signed up frontâ€¦ the possibilities are endless." She paced thoughtfully as she muttered.

"Rikki?" Hadley approached her as soon as Denman moved away. "Are you sure about this?"

Rikki didn't bother turning to look in his direction as she answered. "This will end it. All of it." Her mind raced as she thought about

how she was going to explain this to Cleo and Bella. And Emma, she remembered, wherever she was. Though nervous, Rikki had a deep set feeling of calm. Her friends would trust her, she knew it deep in her soul.

"You'll leave me and my friends alone. _Forever_." Rikki spoke loudly, clearly. "You'll have mermaids of your own to study, you won't need us."

Denman nodded, still pacing the floor thoughtfully. "And what else do you get?" She asked, skepticism still etched across her face.

"We just want our freedom." Rikki stated. "Leave us alone, we'll do the same for you."

Denman seemed to be pondering the deal, though not completely convinced. "So I tell your Aunt I've cured youâ€|" She spoke thoughtfully, quietly.

"And I work that same twenty-four hour power swap spell in order to fool Magsâ€|" Rikki avoided Nick's accusatory gaze.

"And you tell me how to create mermaids." Denman stood in front of Rikki, her arms crossed. "And then?"

Rikki took in a breath. "And then I get out of here. Mags will be glad to send me back to Australia, I'm sure of it."

"And me?" Denman raised an eyebrow.

"Knock yourself out." Rikki matched Denman's steely gaze. "Make your own merpeople to test on."

"And I suppose you'll be wanting to draw up another contract." Denman rolled her eyes.

"No." Rikki replied, surprising her. "Just a gag order. You can't say my name, or the names of any of my friends." She exhaled. "We can have one drawn up, signed, and notarized within an hour."

"You're on." Denman's eyes shone brightly as she stuck out a hand for Rikki to shake.

Rikki did so, but grudgingly. She took in a deep breath as Denman began excitedly cleaning her equipment.

This was the best solution.

Right?

31. The Power Game

A strong hand gripped Rikki's shoulder as she exited the practice pool.

"Nick! You scared me." Rikki gasped. She hadn't realized anyone had followed her outside.

"So what's the real plan?" Nick didn't waste time with pleasantries.

His face was serious, set.

"What?" Rikki pulled out her car keys, getting ready to drive to the notary so that she and Denman could make their gag order official.

"You heard me." Nick was clearly not in the mood to joke around. "What is the real plan, Rikki?"

"You just heard it." Rikki spoke firmly, but avoided Nick's eyes.

"What?" Nick grabbed Rikki's keys from her hand, standing between her and the car. "You're going to tell Denman how to turn someone? For real?"

Rikki bristled at his anger, but remained composed. "Yes, in exchange for her silence. Rikki spoke calmly, confidently.

"But what guarantee do you really have that she won't talk?" Nick's voice grew louder. "You're not going to trust some lousy gag order."

"This had to end, Nick." Rikki didn't expect him to understand. "I'm playing the biggest card I've got. Denman can run her tests, as many tests as she wants. She'll have no further use for me or my friends. She faced Nick, stepping up to him slowly, hoping he wouldn't push her away, then wrapping her arms around his waist. "We couldn't keep running from her forever, things had to change."

"But now everything is going to change. The whole world. I- I mean, everyone will know mermaids exist, that they're real." Nick let his head drop wearily onto Rikki's shoulder, deeply breathing in the beachy smell of her hair.

"But no one will know that I'm one." Rikki gently stroked Nick's hair, smoothing it down his neck in an effort to calm him.

"You're going back to Australia."

Rikki froze as Nick's words echoed out into the twilight. She'd forgotten that he'd heard that.

"Yes." She said finally. "I am."

Nick roughly pulled away from her. "And you were going to tell me this when? I thought we were closer than this, Rikki, I thought you'd talk to me if you were going to leave."

"I only just made this decision." Rikki said apologetically. "I wish I'd been able to talk to you about it privately, but--"

"But the psycho doctor had me and my tail locked up at the bottom of a pool." Bitterness dripped from Nick's voice as he angrily kicked at Rikki's car tire. "I mean, do you know how humiliating that was, Rikki? And if you think I'm going to let you do that switching spell on me again so that we can trick your Aunt you're in for a big disappointment. There's no way in hell I'd agree to--"

"I wasn't going to ask you." Rikki said quickly.

"You weren't?" Nick stopped in his tracks. "Well, who else would you ask? Zane?"

"I'm going to make Hadley do it."

Nick's eyes shot open as a bitter laugh escaped from his throat. "Of course." He nodded his head rapidly. "Of course. The guy betrayed you, manipulated you, and tried to _date_ you, and now you're going to ask him to do you a favor? You know you can't trust him, Rikki. At least you know you can trust _me_."

"I was never going to ask you, ok?" Rikki's defenses sprang into action. "I knew how much you hated being under that spell and I wasn't going to put you through that again. Nick, you're angry for no reasonâ€¦ Did you _want_ me to ask you?"

"What? No." Nick looked down at the ground. "I just don't want you to askâ€¦ _him_."

"He owes me. Big time." Rikki felt the tension fade as Nick let out a long exhale.

"I don't want you to leave." Nick's voice was void of emotion, yet full of it at the same time.

"I don't want to either." Rikki meant it, taking his warm hands in hers as she spoke. "But I can't keep this secret from Mags forever, and she definitely can't handle me being a mermaid, she's shown us thatâ€¦"

"So move in with me." Nick said eagerly. "You said it, you're eighteen. We could get a place together."

Rikki's cheeks flushed at the thought of the two of them living together. Sharing a stoveâ€¦ a sink, â€¦ bed. He looked so hopeful, it pained her to look into his eyes and say what she needed to say.

"I need to go home." She stated flatly. "I want to." Rikki drew in a deep breath. "Florida isn't my home, Nick. Plus, I want to be home with Cleo and Bella when Denman's research goes public."

"And your Dad will just let you come back? And shack up with your friends?" Nick spat out. "Or were you just planning on moving right in with _Zane_?"

"Mags already convinced my Dad to let me stay with _Cleo_." Rikki fought to keep her cool after the jab about her going back to Zane.

Nick's eyes bore into Rikk's for several seconds before he stepped back, shrugging his shoulders as he did so. "You'd better go find him." He gestured towards Rikki's car door. "Hadley. Tell him he gets to have fins for a day." Nick stalked off into the evening light, his arms swinging angrily at his sides.

* * *

><p>Two hours later, Rikki finally pulled into Hadley's driveway. The

gag order had been signed by both her and Denman, and Denman had already called Mags to tell her that Rikki had been cured; that she was completely human again.<p>

Hadley had been surprised when Rikki had told him she wanted to use him for the switching spell, and he'd also been strangely reluctant. It didn't take much, however, to change his mind. Rikki didn't know if he felt genuinely guilty or not, but if he was acting he was doing a remarkably good job at it. It had taken her a bit longer than she's expected to collect the ingredients, but she was finally here.

Rikki kept her back to Hadley as she made the preparations. She wasn't ready to speak to him any more than was absolutely necessary.

"So, uh, one more time, explain exactly what's going to happen?" Hadley asked anxiously from his seat at the table.

Rikki rolled her eyes; she'd already gone through everything with him twice. "You drink the potion. After that, you'll be just like me for twenty-four hours. A merman. And you'll have to cope just like I have to every day. Avoid water, stay out of the rain, and be careful with drinks, etcetera. After the twenty-four hours is up we will switch back. You'll be human again."

"And what will you do during the twenty-four hours?" Hadley fiddled with the button on his shirt, distracted.

Rikki shrugged. "I'll be human. I can do whatever I want."

"You'll help me, though, right?" Hadley stood, his eyes pleading with Rikki.

"Hadn't planned on it." She poured the potion into two tall glasses and handed one to Hadley. "Cheers."

* * *

><p>Fifteen minutes later Rikki was leaving his house and starting her car. The spell had worked once again. When she'd left him, Hadley'd been flopping around on the kitchen floor, trying to reach a towel so that he could dry himself and stand. She didn't know how he was going to handle his day of merman-ness but, to be honest, Rikki didn't much care.<p>

"Hello?" Rikki called into her house, looking around for Mags. Lights were on and her Aunt's car was in the driveway, she knew she must be at home somewhere.

"Rikki!" Mags burst from the kitchen, making Rikki jump. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Mags said quickly. "Howâ€¦" She became momentarily cautious. "How are you feeling?"

"Um, a little drained." Rikki tried her best to look exhausted. It wasn't hard.

"Listen, Rikki, before you say anything," Mags was speaking quickly, defensively. "I know you're probably not thrilled about me going to Linda, I mean, Doctor Denman, but I just knew she'd know a way to cure you and I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to fix things

for you. I mean, I saw the spell book and I thought 'well, if there are spells to take these powers away for one day there must be a way to take them away forever,' and I was right!" A joyous smile spread across Mags's face as she placed her hands on Rikki's shoulders.

Rikki fought to retain her composure, though her stomach turned.

"I know you may be upset now, Rik, but this is for the best. You get to lead a normal life now. You don't have to worry anymore." Mags smiled, satisfied, as she smoothed Rikki's hair behind her ears.

All at once, something changed. Rikki suddenly found it easy to feel calm as Mags spoke. In fact, she almost felt happy all of a sudden. Mags looked stress-free, more at ease than she'd been in weeks. The stressed out and wrinkled expression she'd been wearing lately was now transformed into a carefree one.

"So you're really normal again?" Mags eyes sparkled hopefully at Rikki.

Rikki nodded, trying to look sad, apologetic, thankful. "Actually Mags," She said, "I feel really good about this. It's nice!" Rikki swallowed. "Not to have to worry anymore."

"Oh sweetie," Mags threw her arms around Rikki's neck, pulling her in for a tight embrace. "I'm just so happy." She drew back, allowing Rikki to take a breath. "Let's go for a walk. We could talk, catch up?"

"That sounds great." And Rikki meant it, too. They could talk through some of their issues, resolve the tension between them before Rikki left. Then, Rikki steeled herself, she could tell Mags about how painfully homesick she was, and how she desperately needed to move back to Australia. She was just concerned about being able to convince her Aunt to agree with her and let her leave. Rikki forced a smile to her face. "Want to walk along the beach?"

It turned out to be the best idea Rikki could have had. She and Mags walked through the tide for hours talking about everything. Mags never apologized for her behavior. In fact, she seemed more sure than ever that she'd done the right thing. Then, after much nervous explanation, Mags shocked Rikki by agreeing with her. She said that it was clear that Rikki needed to go home to her friends in Australia.

"No offence, Rikki." She'd said tightly. "But when I signed up to take you in I didn't exactly sign up for all this magical mermaid business and spells and stuff. I could really use a break. But hey!" Mags offered as an afterthought, "Now that you're normal again, life will be so much easier for you!" Her smile was bright, happy.

"Right." Rikki struggled to sound as chipper and carefree as her Aunt. "So much easier."

Rikki excused herself to her room a short while later, giving the excuse that there were phone calls she needed to make. It was true, Rikki really did need to call Lewis and the others and tell them all about her final deal with Denman, but that could wait till a bit

later. Right now Rikki just seriously needed to be alone.

Everything had happened so fast. Too fast. Rikki needed a moment to catch up, process everything.

Rikki dropped down onto her bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling. When she'd woken up that morning she'd been happy that they'd tricked Denman, mad at Hadley, and was growing concerned about a big History exam that was coming up. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, she was packing to go home to Australia, Denman was going to know how to turn humans into mer-people, and Hadleyâ€¦ Well, she was still mad at Hadley.

Rikki's phone rang shrilly from the side table. She groaned when she saw Denman's number on the display. "Yes?" She forced herself to sound confident.

"I have it all worked out." Denman didn't seem interested in pleasantries any more than Rikki did. "You're making your own arrangements for your trip back to Australia, yes?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." Rikki made a quick note so that she wouldn't forget.

"Good." Denman continued. "The next full moon is in two and a half weeks. We will arrive the day before and plan to stay a week after it passes, just to make sure it really worked."

"We?" Rikki asked wearily as she jotted notes.

"Oh yes, Hadley will be joining me." Denman said brusquely. "He'll be the one going into the pool on the full moon."

"Really?" Rikki couldn't hide her surprise. Hadley had been pretty unenthusiastic about becoming a merman for just twenty-four hours, she'd thought he'd changed his mind about it. "Are you sure he still wants that?"

"I don't much care either way." Denman's voice was steely over the phone. "He and I had an agreement. Information on you in exchange for making him a merman. I'm just upholding my end of our bargain."

"Whoa, wait." Rikki's brain struggled to think back. "Your bargain was only that you had to tell him how to become a mer, not that you actually had to turn him. That way the choice is his, he can do it when he decides he's ready-"

"He wants to be a merman." Denman cut in sharply. "So he'll be a merman. It's really not any of your business, Rikki."

Rikki's mouth snapped shut. Denman was right. Rikki had no further business with Hadley, what did she care what Denman had planned? She forced herself to tune into Denman, who was still talking.

"-And once we conclude our initial testing we'll be on our way." Denman was explaining. "You won't hear from me again. Provided the transformation is truly permanent."

Rikki heard the touch of warning in Denman's voice. "It will be." She

whispered, then clicked the phone off. She took a long, calming breath before turning it back on and dialing Lewis's number.

"Lewis? You may want to get the others before I tell you about what happened today." Rikki sighed. "Things are getting ready to change."

* * *

><p>Nick tore the pictures from his walls, throwing them into a box next to his bed. He wanted to forget, to forget everything. Kaitlyn, Rikki, mermaids, all of it.<p>

All of their research, any books he had on magic, all of it went into the box. Nick wanted nothing more than to get it all out of his sight. Then, he saw an unfamiliar black box on the shelf tucked nearly out of sight behind a spell book.

Inside was the blue crystal necklace Rikki had found in the ocean. The one that allowed her to control humans.

An idea trickled into Nick's head. It was a long shot, but it could fix everything.

"I want to forget."

32. Leaving to Come Back

Mags's smile brightened as she opened the front door to Nick. "You knocked?" She laughed lightly. "You usually just walk on in." She stepped aside to allow him to walk through the entry.

"Is Rikki home?" Nick asked politely, his eyes anxiously darting around the room.

"She sure is. Upstairs." Mags nodded towards the steps before turning back to Nick. "Soâ€¦ are you all better now?" She couldn't hide her discomfort as she referred to the spell that had made Nick a merman for 24 hours.

"You betcha." Nick nodded to her before jogging up the stairs to Rikki's room.

"Nick!" Rikki leapt to her feet as her bedroom door swung open. "I, I'm so glad you're here. I've been trying to call you-"

"I know, and I'm sorry." Nick's voice was low, almost timid. "But what I have to say to youâ€¦ it needs to be said in person."

"Oh. Ok." Rikki felt her pulse quicken. Nick seemed oddly calm, set in whatever he was about to tell her. It didn't give Rikki a good feeling at all.

He sat on the edge of her bed, gesturing for her to sit next to him. Rikki did.

"Here." Nick surprised her by practically shoving an unfamiliar black box into her hands. "This was still at my place."

"Oh." Rikki had forgotten all about the blue amulet. With all of the drama with Denman, she hadn't spared a single thought on the mysterious blue gem. "Thanks Nick, I appreciate it."

"That's not everything." Nick pulled a hunk of fabric from his other pocket. There, carefully wrapped inside separate folds, were the two moon stones they'd been using to simulate moonlight. Hers and Cleo's.

"I'd forgotten all about these." Rikki took them from him with care. "Thanks so much for bringing them over."

"No problem." Nick paused, unsure of the best way to continue. "Rikkiâ€¦ I've helped you out a lot since I met you. At least, I've done all I know how to do."

"You've been great." Rikki took his hand in her own. "I mean really, Nick. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You would have been alright." Nick answered quickly.

Rikki frowned, unsure of how to interpret Nick's hasty response. "I just want you to know how much I care for you." She said carefully. "And how much I appreciate you."

"I believe that you care for me." Nick's dark eyes met Rikki's. "And I trust that you'll always do what's best for me."

"You're right." Rikki's frown deepened. What was Nick getting at? She could tell he was headed somewhere, but couldn't tell what his point was. "Nickâ€¦ what is it that you think is best for you?"

Nick's eyes flashed to the floor, clearly surprised that Rikki had picked up on his lead-in. "Wellâ€¦" He took a breath, boosting his confidence though it was shaky at the moment. "I want you to make me forget."

Whatever Rikki had been expecting, it wasn't that. "You want me toâ€¦. What?"

"You know." Nick shrugged in the direction of the amulet. "I want you to command me to forget all about it." His eyes met hers reluctantly. "About mermaids."

Rikki's breath caught in her throat as pain gripped at her stomach. "You want me to use the amuletâ€¦ to command you to forget about me."

"Not just about you." Nick said quickly, almost as if he thought saying that would make Rikki feel better. "I want to forget about everything I know about mermaids."

"Kaitlyn-" Rikki began.

"Kaitlyn too." Nick's voice seemed void of any emotion as he looked at the floor. "At least, about what she was, and how she died."

Rikki swallowed hard. "And I'd be-"

"Just an exchange student I happen to be in Life Skills class with." Nick's dark eyes narrowed as he studied the carpet. "You know, I still have our flour child. What did we name it, Bobby?" He laughed humorlessly. "You know, I think Hadley's forgotten all about that assignment, he hasn't so much as mentioned it in almost a mo--"

"Stop talking." Rikki felt a fire in her chest. She fought to keep it in check, she didn't know if she was angry or just hurt. "You're telling meâ€¦ You want me to use the crystal to what, make you forget about mermaids?"

"Exactly." Nick nodded emphatically, hoping his voice didn't sound shaky.

"That won't even work, Nick." Rikki crossed her arms over her chest irritably. "We've tested that kind of stuff. The memories always come back."

"I know," Nick said quickly, "But your test subjects were always trying to remember. I mean, Cleo commanded Zane to forget his middle name and it took him two hours to remember it. And he was really working to figure it out! I would want to forget." He exhaled. "I think it could work."

Rikki nodded soberly. "And when were you wanting to do this?"

"Before you leave." Nick met her eyes but she looked away. "As soon as we can."

"Were you wanting to do it now?" Rikki asked, her voice tight as she swallowed the lump in her throat. "I mean, you brought over all of the ingredients." She gestured to the amulet and crystals.

"If I don't do it soon I'll talk myself out of it." The words escaped Nick's lips before he could stop them.

"I see." Rikki nodded. She paced the floor for several seconds before whipping around to face him. "Fine. Let's do it now."

Nick's stomach clenched as she said the words. In the very deepest crevices of his being he'd kind of hoped she would have turned him down flat. He quickly shook that feeling away, burying it once again.

"Soâ€¦" Rikki's voice was tight. "I guess we should come up with exactly what you want me to tell you, you know?" She angrily pointed at the desk chair, trying to keep control of her emotions. "Sit down. And tell me exactly what you want me to say."

* * *

><p>"Nick?" An unfamiliar voice called to him, echoing slightly through a hazy darkness. "Nick?"

Wait, he'd heard that voice somewhere beforeâ€¦ hadn't he? Nick pulled his eyes open. It was harder than he'd thought it would be. He must have been really out.

"Helloooo? Earth to Nick?" A blonde he didn't recognize was waving a

slightly frantic hand in front of his dvto focus, examining the stranger in front of him.

No! He thought harder. He knew her. "Rikki." The name popped into his head all of a sudden.

"Yeah?" The girl seemed nervous, but appeared to be trying to act casual. It was strange, Nick didn't really understand it.

Nick frowned. "What are we?" His eyes fell on the open notebook in front of him. "We were studying?" Hazy memories began to slowly form in his mind.

"Uh, yeah." Rikki said matter-of-factly. "Til I went to grab a, uh, snack and you fell asleep. Geez, Nick, I was only gone for like, a minute." Her voice sounded genuine but her eyes lacked confidence. "You, um, must have fallen asleep."

"Right." Suddenly, Nick remembered it all. It was weird, the memories suddenly flashed back all at once. He suddenly felt silly; of course he knew who she was. Why had it taken him so long to remember? Shrugging, he looked up at Rikki, who was still staring at him, waiting for him to continue speaking. "Uh, sorry Rik." He blinked a couple times. "Guess I dozed off."

"No sweat, Jet." Rikki tossed a text book at him. "You'd better get going, I need to get packing."

"Right." Nick nodded. Yeah, that was right. Rikki's time as an exchange student was ending, and she'd be going back to Australia soon. He'd forgotten. "Hey, thanks for helping me study." He stood, stretching, working out his achy joints.

"Sure." Rikki's voice caught in her throat as she took an instinctive step back from Nick.

Nick's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. She was acting funny, but then again, she was from another country, she was bound to be a little odd. Nick didn't think anything more about it. He held his arms out to her. "It was nice having class with you, at least we still have a few more days to go. Hope you have safe travels."

Rikki hesitated before stepping into the hug. She let out a long exhale as Nick's strong arms wrapped around her. His warmth making her feel so safe, it pained her to think about how much she'd miss his friendship. Leaving him behind, knowing that she would never see him again! it hurt.

"Hey." Nick said quietly. His voice snapped Rikki back into the here and now.

"Uh." She cleared her throat. "Yeah?"

"I was thinking!" Nick pulled her in slightly tighter before releasing her and taking one step back. "I'd like to keep in touch, you know?" His eyes flickered around the room, avoiding hers. "After you go back to Australia. Can we do that?"

"Sure." Rikki nodded, maybe a bit too enthusiastically. "I mean," she took a deep breath, "that sounds nice."

"Great." Nick found himself giving Rikki a hard look up and down. She was strange, very strange, that was for sure, but there was something about her—he didn't see an harm in exchanging the occasional letter or phone call. "So if you don't mind, you, um, could give me your number."

"You have it." Rikki caught herself before she spoke without thinking. "Remember? I gave it to you after Had- I mean, after Mr. Cruz assigned us to work together. On the flour child." She added as an afterthought.

"Right—he" Nick didn't actually remember that part, but a quick thumb through his phone proved Rikki right. There was her number, right in his contacts. "Well, I'll need your address then."

"Sure." Rikki's face brightened. She found herself simultaneously eager to get Nick out of the house and wanting to enjoy his company as long as possible. "Nick!" She blurted out. "Would you like to stay and—"

"I really should get going." Nick didn't appear to have heard her speak as he slammed his textbook shut. "So I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Rikki forced a pained smile to her face, though it took a lot of effort. "I'll, uh—he see you tomorrow."

Nick walked out the front door a few minutes later, waving goodbye with the sheet of paper containing Rikki's address. Rikki watched him go, a sharp pain settling in the pit of her stomach.

She wasn't going to see him tomorrow. She wasn't going to see him again. And he had no idea.

* * *

><p>"Got everything?" Mags's tone was chipper as she handed Rikki a mug of coffee.<p>

"Mostly." Rikki set the coffee down without taking a sip. She figured she still had a few hours left before the spell wore off, but she didn't want to risk anything. Not when she was this close to getting home.

Rikki sighed. Her dad had been angry. More angry at Mags than at Rikki, it seemed. He just couldn't understand why Rikki wasn't able to just stay in America. He was far from thrilled that Rikki had decided to live with Cleo, but he had eventually agreed to it.

Things had been frosty between Rikki and Mags ever since Mags had helped Denman, but things were manageable. Mags was pretending as if nothing had happened at all, like Rikki had been planning this trip home all along, and Rikki was quick to follow her lead.

A car horn honking outside caught their attention.

"That'll be your cab!" Mags hurried to grab Rikki's suitcases. "I'll help carry."

One quick, semi-heartfelt goodbye later and Rikki found herself strapped into a cab and zooming towards the airport. She fiddled with her phone in her hand, fighting the urge to call Nick. Or even just to send him a quick textâ€¦|.

The phone rang suddenly, making Rikki jump. She groaned before answering. "What is it?"

"Just making sure we're still on the same page." Denman's icy voice tinkled through the phone.

"You'll be in Australia by the next full moon, I've got it." Rikki said wearily.

"And for-"

"And for a week after. I _know_." Rikki was not in the mood to deal with Denman right now.

"Can't blame me for checking." Denman said coolly.

"Just call me when you get here." Rikki hung up, not caring if Denman was finished talking to her or not.

Her phone buzzed a moment later. A text. Rikki rolled her eyes. What did Denman want now? A message from Hadley popped onto her screen.

'_Can we talk after class today?'_

Rikki turned off the screen without answering. She hadn't told Hadley she was leaving this soon. Several minutes went by before the phone chimed again.

'_Just talked to Linda. You can't leave today, please, I need to talk to you. Hadley.'_

Rikki read, then deleted both messages. She didn't care if she ever spoke to Hadley again. His betrayal had hurt, and badly. But worst of allâ€¦| Rikki sighed. It made her furious with herself. Why had she been so quick to trust a total stranger with the biggest secret of her life? Rikki hated that she had thought he'd cared about her. She should have known better, there was no way around it. She tucked her phone off and tucked it into her bag without answering the message.

* * *

><p>Hadley checked his phone for the tenth time in the last hour as an office attendant delivered a note to his desk.<p>

He read, '_Rikki Chadwick is no longer enrolled in your class.'

—

Hadley crumpled the page angrily before tossing it into the trash can.

"Alright, class." Hadley called as he slammed his attendance book open. "Partner up."

Nick's eyes darted back and forth as the rest of the class separated into pairs. Rikki had been his partnerâ€¦ where was she?

"Um, Mr. Cruz?" Nick approached the desk. "Rikki isn't here yet."

Hadley clenched his jaw. "Rikki," His voice was tight, "is no longer enrolled at this school."

"But that can't be right." Nick frowned. "She told me she'd be here today, she said-"

"Well, it looks like she wasn't honest with you, was she? There was a hint of triumph in Mr. Cruz's eyes, though Nick couldn't figure out why. "Back to your seat, Mr. Donovan." Hadley said stiffly, nodding toward Nick's desk.

Nick trudged back to his seat, his demeanor quickly changing from content to surly. Rikki had lied to him? That wasn't like her. Or was it? Things became cloudy whenever he thought about Rikki and their friendship. He realized he really didn't know anything about her at all. Just that he was sorry not to get to see her today. Maybe this was in character after all?

Nick stared at the blank page in front of him. He hated how intensely disappointed he was, now that he knew that he wouldn't get another chance to see Rikki. Quickly, he pulled out his phone.

'_No goodbye?_'

He pressed 'send.'

"No phones! Phones away!" Hadley said pointedly to Nick.

Nick sighed as he tucked his phone into his pocket. Suddenly time seemed to be moving more slowly.

* * *

><p>The plane was dark and quiet as it flew through the nighttime sky. Most of the other passengers were sleeping, but Rikki couldn't relax. For the tenth time, she reread the last text she'd received from Nick.<p>

"No goodbyeâ€¦" She murmured. She'd never answered. She wouldn't have known what to say.

Rikki closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. She just needed to put all of this behind her. Everything about America. Every_one._ She drew in a long, deep breath. Cleo and Lewis would be there to meet her at the airport, then she could get settled in at Cleo's and begin to lead the next chapter in her life.

* * *

><p>The plane landed early in the morning, almost before the sun had fully risen. Rikki hadn't slept a wink, she'd been too deep in thought.<p>

"Rikki! Hey, Rikki!"

Rikki pulled her suitcase off of the carousel before turning toward the familiar voice.

Cleo jogged up, arms wide, and pulled Rikki into a tight hug. Rikki dropped the bag and hugged her friend back.

"I am so glad you're home." Cleo gave Rikki one more solid squeeze before releasing her. "It's not been the same here without you."

"Where's Lewis?" Rikki looked, but didn't see him.

"He's waiting in the car. I'll tell him he can go ahead and bring it around." Cleo pulled Rikki to sit next to her on the bench. "Well, I'll tell him in a minute or two." Cleo's face grew serious. "You should know Zane was pretty thrilled to hear that you were coming back. I'm pretty sure you'll be hearing from him."

"Thanks for the heads up." Rikki felt suddenly weary. She'd hardly spared a single thought for Zane since he'd left Florida.

"So, will you be telling him that you're single? Or that you're with someone?" Cleo nudged Rikki's shoulder playfully. "That you're with someone?" Cleo was clearly fishing for information on what had transpired between Rikki and Nick after she'd left with Lewis.

Rikki let her head drop onto Cleo's shoulder, resting it there. She didn't know where to start. She needed to tell Cleo all of the new Denman details and discuss exactly how to handle it. She wanted to tell Cleo about how deeply Hadley had betrayed her, and about his desire to become a merman.

She needed to tell Cleo about how close she and Nick had become, and how much she cared about him. She should also tell her Rikki's heart clenched painfully about what Nick had asked her to do. How she'd used the moon stones and the amulet (now carefully stored in her luggage,) to command Nick to forget everything he knew about mermaids. How Nick now remembered Rikki as nothing more than an ordinary exchange student he'd had a class with once. He no longer knew anything about Denman or Kaitlyn's death, or

Rikki swallowed. She needed to tell Cleo this. All of this. Rikki drew in a long, shuddering breath before opening her eyes.

Cleo was looking at Rikki hard, clearly wondering what Rikki wasn't telling her.

"It's a really long story." Rikki tiredly pulled herself to her feet before offering a hand to Cleo. "Let's just go home, ok? I promise I'll tell you everything. Tomorrow."

"Ok." Cleo said calmly but seriously. "And there's Lewis!"

The two pulled Rikki's bags out onto the curb and into the trunk of Lewis's sedan, then headed towards home.

Rikki felt suddenly exhausted as she sank into the wam backseat listening to her two friends jabbering away in the front seat. Her

phone chirped loudly, jerking her awake, She fumbled for it, intent on shutting it off, but stopped when she saw Nick's number on the display.

She read the text, '_I guess you had to leave earlier than you'd expected. Keep in touch, ok? Who knows, maybe my mom will let me spend a semester as an exchange student in Australia? Nick._'

Rikki felt a warmth spread through her chest. She realized she was smiling as she reread the message. He wanted to keep in touch. Maybe she'd be able to handle this after all.

The car zoomed down the quiet highway. Still an hour to go until they reached Cleo's home. '_My _home.' Rikki thought to herself. Rikki drew in a long sigh. Things were going to be ok.

Rikki's head dropped heavily onto the seat's headrest as she fell into a deep, deep sleep, thoughts of Denman pushed out of her mind. It was good to be home.

End
file.